

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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The Deep In shallow waters

by Serafina Kent Bathrick

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By opening day everyone in America will have read, seen, or heard about THE DEEP at least fifteen times. (1) Thus THE DEEP follows JAWS as another vacation-time thriller and another sea story for Robert Shaw. While both films draw on codes of male bonding, THE DEEP reveals a far more pernicious legitimization of such a relation, going far beyond the adventurist ideology and the metaphorical implications of JAWS. THE DEEP clearly encompasses and reinforces racial, sexual, and class antagonisms and sets male comradeship in a tradition of white supremacy, private enterprise, and imperialism.

THE DEEP opens with aerial shots which bring us slowly down to land on the island of Bermuda. Through a series of dissolves, we pass from tropical foliage to sand and blue ocean. Finally we plunge into the sea where we watch Gail and David (Jacqueline Bisset and Nick Nolte) cavort underwater with their camera and scuba gear. However, as soon as their play among sunken ships leads them to discover a medallion and a vial of morphine (both the color of gold), the issues of men's work, allegiances, and ambitions become central to the film. As the innocent couple carry their findings ashore, a black hotel worker, who is part of the Haitian mafia which preys on the island, observes them. These men (led by Louis Gossett) have long sought access to the drug cache, known to lie in a sunken WW2 navy ammunition ship. Gail and David have become interested in the history of the golden artifact, and directed to the authority on local shipwrecks, a reclusive scholar named Romer Treece (Robert Shaw). A chance storm, he tells them, has merged two sunken vessels. One is filled with munitions and morphine; the other, an ancient Spanish galleon, contains some baubles a royal suitor was sending to his intended.

At this point in the film narrative the two of treasure represent both the interests and the modes of business of the two groups of Bermuda residents. The blacks who traffic in drugs appear to be a part of a mob (the distributors are in New York City); their kind of business closely

resembling a stereotypical mafia organization. The operation of the network undermines both the morality and the entrepreneurial promise of the American system. The white men are characterized as adventurous explorers — concerned with the historical authenticity of the gold they seek, as well as with its market value. The bond between Treece and David will finally take the form of a business deal; their contract (integrated into the film as a structural device) and competition will place them firmly in a tradition of private enterprise. Their partnership will be the proof of the vitality and enduring system of rewards that exist within capitalism.

The place of Gail, the only woman in *THE DEEP* (but groping for air in all the ads), is significant to further insure the moral position of the white men. Her nature as sex-object and independent modern woman are both traits which help explain her victimization by blacks, and in this way she functions to propel the narrative by defining as chivalrous the mission of David and Treece: killers who are richly rewarded for their adventure. It is in this context that the film approaches the subject of male bonding, relying on both notions of sexual morality and ethical business practice to reinforce its ideology.

As viewers we are moved swiftly from a place where we strongly identify with the newly arrived young tourists (our pleasure at this point also derives from being voyeurs of the braless Bisset), to a more distanced place as spectators who have paid to watch the male violence that accelerates throughout the film. Both the technology of underwater filmmaking and what C. Wright Mills calls the "machinery of amusement" (2) function in *THE DEEP* to provide the underwater spectacle we want to see, but more important they sustain the film's central focus on male bonding. We can best understand the ideology of this phenomenon by noting how the interdependence of violence and friendship evolves through the uses of underwater machinery and the related laws of men's work. The sexist assumptions that give impetus to the heroics of the white men, and the racism evidenced by their desire to kill off blacks while collecting gold, are consistently linked to technology and its promise of power. And the power that the mastery of this technology provides our heroes insures them sexual and material rewards for their buddy adventure. They win because they are more powerful. And because they have been shown to be morally and ethically superior to their enemies, their triumph seems only right.

If technology and business acumen are the key legitimating factors for male bonding (both through the filmmaking techniques of a 40% underwater narrative and the functions of scuba gear within the narrative), we need to look carefully at how the uses of this machinery are inherent in bourgeois ideology which equates progress with science and assumes that natural forces must be repressed as a threat to civilization. History has shown us how white hegemony has used this control of nature by technology to further its interests and to contain its less sophisticated enemies under the guise of spreading western culture — civilization per se. As the ecology movement today has revealed, we

are rarely invited to question the impact of technology as an instrument of domination, for its ends always justify its means.

In *THE DEEP* it becomes clear how what was sold to playful (and affluent) tourists as the machinery of amusement readily converts into an underwater arsenal. David and Treece use these "toys" to combat the island's blacks in order to acquire the precious gems and gold. But the behavior and interaction of the white woman and the mob of black men set in motion the conversion of these "toys" into weaponry for the race war which concludes *THE DEEP*. Both are necessary to justify David and Treece's relationship, and the spoken contracts which bind them to each other and to the task of conquest. The first encounters in the film depict the collapse of Gail as a sexual adult woman, and permit our outraged heroes to transfer their sexual desires into a shared pursuit of sunken treasure. Later episodes bring the struggle of the racial antagonists into full swing, and lead to a happy ending that celebrates the pairing of two white men as victors.

At the outset of the film, David and Gail swim happily among exotic fish in the Caribbean. He takes her picture with his nifty underwater camera while she makes mock-cheesecake poses in her transparent tee shirt. Until she is severely frightened by an as yet invisible eel, the two are just plain having fun underwater. After they have climbed onto their boat following her scare and his underwater lecture about staying calm, she pouts: "We might as well be married for all the concern I get around here." But when he becomes amorous as she changes out of her wet shirt (he and we see only her bare back), she makes it quite clear that she prefers to return quickly to the hotel where it's warm and dry. The sense that he more than she enjoys the world of nature and adventure ("I feel things so I do 'em") is further emphasized when she accuses him of absurd ventures that merely add to his tee shirt collection (he is wearing a Mt. Everest model at the time). David, as played by Nick Nolte, a newcomer and the ultimate in heavy cardboard, is particularly vulnerable to Gail's intelligence and criticism. We initially experience the couple from New York as voyeurs who watch her bare breasts through a white shirt both underwater and as she surfaces (a different pleasure in each shot), and further indulge as we watch him watching her and photographing her for later viewing. But while it's sexy to share air and play games underwater, when she turns down David's request that they swim nude, we too realize his frustration of seeing but not doing. David and Gail's use of masks and oxygen tanks is just for fun, but for him, it's a little bit boring. And just as we realize there is a difference between their vacation ideas, meeting Treece provides David (and us) with the possibility for "real" adventure.

From the first meeting of these physically opposite heroes (David is a young gregarious specimen of strength; the other an angular, rude, older man with the physique of an alcoholic), the framing and camera angles accentuate the intimacy of their relationship. When David and Gail first stand outside Treece's lighthouse door, there is a tight two-shot of the men with the older man's face featured because it is framed by a small

barred window. As the eager tourist peers in, he is intrigued by a guided roughness. (Surely Shaw is a second Richard Burton, a student of that haunted look.) Not until the neophyte exhibits both trust and respect does the mentor warm up, ultimately acting as host and protector, gaining a paternal place in this ersatz family.

The parent-child construct that evolves may be one of the many token efforts to legitimize the male bonding: it implies that because it's natural to need a family, there's nothing sexual about an older-younger pair of buddies. The film is not afraid to suggest that Treece is a real loner however, and though he is often situated in front of a framed photo of a man and woman (soft focus suggests there was a woman), he refers only to his mother, recalling her wish that he retain a faithful bodyguard to be his "family." Thus, in spite of the characteristic innuendo that clears away suspicion of homosexuality, the plot and the imagery in *THE DEEP* remind us constantly that the two men are completely involved in their friendship and in the ways that it is changing their lives. Repeated medium close ups frame the two men as they lean to look at maps and artifacts, or as they signal each other with gestures and glances while swimming through the dark corridors of a shipwreck.

The interdependence of David and Treece is finally stated through a verbal contract, but before this happens the sexuality of their friendship is established. Treece has asserted his authority as a white islander and David's teacher. "I'm all the government you need," he tells the naive boy who had plans to report information about the morphine supply to the local law. Treece shares his knowledge of the history of this place along with his sense for its mystery. There is something sexual linked to his fascination with such adventure: "If the Jamaican pirates don't get you, it'll be the cold embrace of the sea!" The two men thus begin to acknowledge a replacement for Gail who is only "the girl" to Treece, and something of a killjoy for David. The two share the same lover now, and while the sea offers them only a cold embrace, she also holds treasures that a team of men can enjoy.

Early in the film, Adam (Burgess Meredith), a corrupt old navy man who knows of the morphine stash and will eventually collaborate with the blacks against Treece, recognizes the sample bottle which David and Gail bring ashore. "This is the real thing all right. The old girl finally lost her virginity." He points out for us that exploring a sealed vessel is an erotic experience for a man. And Treece knows that the navy ship's impenetrable body had long frustrated the local drug racketeers. The craggy scholar tells David that eager blacks had approached the ship, attempting to perform "an autopsy with everything but forceps" as they sought her treasure. The language of both Treece and Adam is full of sexist ambiguity and implications about the powers of women to hold and withhold. It may also be significant at this point that the white men are discussing only the vessel that contains the infamous drugs, and are careful to attribute to blacks these attitudes towards the sunken ship. Thus while they name the sexual allure of their undersea conquest, they shift the focus from their own libidinous impulses to those of the

primitives — neatly depending on our own racist beliefs and fears. Gail provides the necessary ideology of chivalry that keeps our heroes' own assault a moral one.

What completes the sexual bond that is implied between the white men is the way in which David's "girlfriend" is reduced to a nonactive participant in the narrative. Just as her sexual identity becomes obscured through a gradual change of costumes (from see-through whites to black wet suits), the use of crosscutting also heightens our acceptance of her evolution-through-victimization. Through the use of this editing device (reminiscent of D. W. Griffith spectacles which build on racial and sexual stereotyping), Gail's voodoo-rape is presented as the cause for (and perhaps the result of) the allegiance between David and Treece.

On the men's first night out to check the sunken treasure, Gail chooses to stay in the hotel, angry at David's bluff machismo. After the dive, the two men climb back onto their boat and are immediately alerted to voodoo dangers by the dead black cat pinned to their cabin door. They also notice that the hotel lights are out, and the association of primitive signals with possible danger to Gail are clear to everyone.

The use of crosscutting at this point extends the distance between the diver rescuers and the woman-in-distress, and similarly extends the duration of her attack. The sequence begins with a shot of Gail entering and attempting to lock her dark room; cut to the two men at sea anxious to move their boat towards shore; cut to Gail in medium shot, aware of possible intruders, and then a close up to show her expression of horror as she sees her attackers; cut to the divers still putting towards shore; cut to Gail now prone on her bed, followed by a montage of shots from her point of view showing blacks in voodoo masks looming above her; cut to the two men now reaching shore just below the hotel; cut to an extreme cut of Gail's bare belly, blood and chicken claws drip and scratch her; cut to David now on a scaffold elevator (one of the many sets built for the film) where he must fight off an enemy black as he attempts to reach the top of the cliff where the hotel is situated. This last dimly lit interlude not only prolongs his arrival at Gail's door, but serves to exhibit for Treece (and us) David's dexterity and know-how. This struggle not only extends the effort to rescue the victimized female, but even diverts us from it by highlighting the "real" drama that takes place between these opposite male adversaries.

David finally reaches Gail, but the ritual rape is over and the urbane sexual woman has become a whimpering child. "I'm so helpless," she cries to him, as if to finalize her submission. This attack represents the second violation of Gail by primitive men. In an earlier scene, after the couple have been briefly but violently abducted by blacks who want to know the whereabouts of the morphine, the leering natives force her to remove her bra. Slow cross-cutting heightens the sexual tension here too, for while the black boss stares at her breasts (*We watch her from above* his point of view and see only her humiliated face and her bared

shoulders), there are cuts between her face, his beady eyes, and David in medium long shot across the room. The terrified blond boy stands with a knife at his throat, anguished at the thought that his moral outcry will result in his death.

The uses of cross-cutting in both these female-as-victim episodes serve to sharpen our sense of and sympathy for the white man's predicament: he must subdue or kill this primitive enemy who threatens to take his finest possession. But the subtext established before the second of these incidents has provided us with an analogous, perhaps more terrifying threat—namely that these same black men are bent on procuring another kind of treasure from another unspoiled woman who lies at the bottom of the ocean. This cold creature will provide them with drugs which they will sell to their contacts in New York City. These men must be stopped; they seek to destroy the heart and mind of America (David and Gail's hometown on top of that). Thus the editing patterns help to reinforce the importance of Treece and David's contract, made in the middle of the film: They will work together and they will meet a three-day deadline by appearing to provide the enemy with drugs while using that time to attain for themselves the nearby gold.

As a typical Hollywood narrative device, the contract gives urgency to the second half of *THE DEEP* and allows us to appreciate the workings of the entrepreneurial relationship. There is always an ideology in the use of a contract as a structural element. The overriding ideology of *THE DEEP*'s presentation of white male bonding is that white men work best when a contract structures their relationship and that they work well under pressure. David and Treece will compete with the blacks for the treasure, but they will do so for the right reasons and, because they are *better* at it, they will win.

In addition to the sexual shift from women to treasure, and the related business morality, there also occurs a change in the uses of technology. Just as Gail and David's romance diminishes along with her status as an independent woman, their romantic "playthings," such as underwater cameras, lights, and masks become the implements needed by the team of men to carry out and win their contest. An aspect of this ideology of the white handyman develops even on the first dive that the men make together. From David's early confrontation with the ravenous moray eel to the final all-out war scenes when live ammunition explodes and tanks and tubes are burst and slashed, there is a steady escalation of violence whereby the machinery of amusement becomes, or becomes confused with, the technology of war. Combat is no longer enough to make modern men into buddies. Only science coupled with business can grant them a legitimate place in today's world.

On the evening of Gail's voodoo-rape, David saves himself from the eel only because he is the owner of an underwater camera with a flash attachment. Still an innocent tourist, he swims behind Treece through dark passages that lead to the sunken treasure. Not yet engaged in the work at hand, and still a spectator who enjoys the marvels of this place,

he stops to watch an enormous fish which stares in wonder at him. David adjusts his camera to photograph the contemplative creature, when the deadly moray suddenly snaps the fish in half. As David cowers he drops his camera to the bottom where the shutter is triggered so that repeated "shots" of light force the eel to retreat. We are reminded that the basic trappings of the tourist can become fiery weapons as the whole screen lights up to attack our own retinas. This "lucky" malfunction brings us to realize that David and Treece's survival will involve a firm alliance between them and the machinery they possess.

Following this first undersea incident and the shore episodes leading to the attack on Gail, the two comrades become more seriously committed to a battle which had begun for the younger man as pure adventure. On the first day of the three-day contract, David and Treece dive (Gail is with them as a fellow worker) to bring back some bags of morphine ampoules. They are using a powerful vacuum hose to remove the layers of sand that have buried the tiny bottles. Suddenly, the suction device lifts a stray hand grenade from the floor of the wreck and there follows an explosion. A series of shots pan and tilt to follow a pile of mortar shells now tumbling around the divers. A kind of war is on, and as the swimmers dodge the corroded relics from WW2, yet another legitimating ideology emerges: this one links our heroes with a tradition of "fighting men." Similarly their knowledge and curiosity about the conquistadors validate David and Treece as daring "discoverers."

On the second dive David and Treece save their lives with the same vacuum machine by surrounding themselves with bubbles and sand which hide them from sharks the enemy attracted to the area. Finally, on the last dive, the ever-ingenious whites use the same machine to blind approaching blacks. Throughout the three tests which Treece and his buddy endure, the machines which they wear or carry to perform acts of searching and uncovering, become the implements of war. Ultimately the enemies cannot survive underwater with any success (although they have some of the necessary gear, and carry spear-guns). They are all drowned or devoured by the forces of the sea, the same natural forces with which they have been associated throughout the film. When the reappearing eel finally eats the head of the black leader, we are clear on the ways of "natural law." As the privileged spectators of a film, we are joined with David and Treece to enjoy the added pleasure of watching the enemy killed off by the same naturally violent powers from which technology has saved the whites. How like the comeuppance strategy which exonerates the racial and sexual brutality committed by white men in all the James Bond films.

The racism in THE DEEP is thus reinforced when blacks are equated with everything that is uncivilized or uncontrollable. Their business is with drugs, their tools are their muscular bodies, their survival is instinctual. It is clear that they cannot combat the genius of the white man whose sophistication is seen as the result of a long and glorious history of daring and winning. This film suggests that it is the innate expertise and the inborn morality of whites which grants them the right

to discover the past and possess its treasure. THE DEEP reminds us that white men make history.

And if the blacks in the film exist to remind us of the constant vigilance and scientific knowledge needed to control and contain their impulses, the one woman in the film serves as a type of in-between creation, for she is neither a primitive nor an enlightened being. Gail has the body of a sexual woman, but as a modern equal to her man she dares to mock and play-until she is subdued. After her rape, she is at once brought to full adulthood and to childish submission. Following that incident Gail becomes a "helper" to her two protectors. Dressed in mannish clothes she cooperates like a junior buddy or a girl Friday. She goes along for the dives, and even gets lucky and kills a last black swimmer who crawls over the edge of the boat to cut the air tubes that keep her men alive.

Gail is especially helpful and creative as a woman when the heroes are stumped by the meaning of a cryptic note which might prove the authenticity of the jewels. Not too liberated, our Gail can still identify a shopping-list when she sees one, especially since it all had to do with courtship. But while the men need her around, she knows her place. In the last shot of the film, after the older man has dynamited the two ships to roll them over the edge of a sea cliff, the somber couple sits on board ship imagining that Treece had met his end. Gail is placed on the far edge of the frame, so that when the older man is reborn and bursts out of the water, calling "David" and flinging the missing dragon and chain into the air, the two men are centered in the frame, united by the glistening arc of gold that connects their outstretched hands.

The last shot in the film is an ecstatic celebration of Treece and David: their teamwork, their energies, their love. What THE DEEP reveals about the world "below the surface," however, is that it is full of both treasure and treachery with the blacks and whites clashing as they each seek power and position. This film is structured to convince us that white men seek only what affirms their place in the tradition of pioneers and enlightened explorers, while blacks corrupt that promise of civilization, preying on its moral and material base. THE DEEP tells us that white men's knowledge of history and their capacity to "manage" and "work" with the technology that is their inheritance, grants them an additional pleasure: the friendship of other men.

Notes:

[1. *Filmmaker's Newsletter*, June 1977, pp. 28-29.](#)

[2. C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People* \(New York, 1963\), p. 349.](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

King Kong meets Exxon

by Ernest Larsen

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"Dance, dance Leroy Brown
Baddest man in the whole damn town
Badder than old King Kong
Meaner than a junkyard dog."
— Jim Croce

"An actor is not a machine, no matter how much they want to say you are." — Marilyn Monroe

Despite \$24 million and superslick promotion, the new KING KONG is much less spectacular than the 1933 original. Instead of concentrating on the special effects and grandiose scale required of true spectacle, the new KONG quickly opts for a classic version of the triangular love story. Dwan (Jessica Lange), the starlet in search of fame, must make the agonizing choice between two males from wildly different backgrounds. Which will it be? Jack Prescott, bearded, long-haired professor of primate zoology at Princeton — in other words, a successful white petit-bourgeois academic. Or Kong, a dark, also hirsute, amazingly expressive monster — the newest version of Rousseau's noble savage.

Lorenzo Semple Jr.'s script carefully prepares for this inexhaustible dilemma by appropriating a suggestion just touched on in the first scenes of the original KING KONG. In those scenes movie showman Carl Denham picks up penniless Ann Darrow in the Bowery, rescuing her after she's caught swiping an apple. Since his money men have decreed he must have a love interest in his newest adventure film, Denham quickly persuades Ann to accompany him to the mysterious Skull Island. This exceedingly short sketch of the economic forces in the Depression anchors the subsequent fantasy in reality. Denham, the adventurous individualist entrepreneur, disappears in Semple's retailored version (even in 1933 he was an outmoded figure, a throwback to an earlier stage of American capitalism). Jack Prescott (Jeff Bridges), the professional academic in 1976, emerges from the none-too-bright first mate Jack Driscoll in 1933. Down-and-out Ann Darrow becomes glamorous Dwan. The romance that the character

Denham was supposed to film becomes the basic plot mechanism of Semple's script.

But before introducing either Dwan or Kong, the essential figures of the romance, Semple sets in motion a critique of corporate capitalism. Oil profiteering and Watergate are the topical sources of a critique which is easily defueled by the campy tone.⁽¹⁾ Both KONGs begin by characterizing the dominant social reality of their time. In 1933, in this one film at least, grim social reality outflanked Hollywood's appetite for "pure" spectacle. The new KONG, like most disaster films, gives recognition to the massive distrust felt by powerless audiences bludgeoned by the economic and psychological manipulations of corporations and government.

Thus both films capitalize on social fears by developing their fantasies within a context that resembles reality — a narrative device which skillfully excuses them from dealing with the real consequences of real fears. (Hollywood's magical ability to wipe the slate clean when the slate is falling to pieces is already a commonplace of ideological criticism.) The first film justifies the journey to Skull Island, the strategic retreat from Western civilization to savage "prehistory," in the self-reflexive terms of spectacle (making a film), ⁽²⁾ the second in the more naked terms of corporate rapacity (the rip-off of oil resources).

The new KONG's modern romance can only be understood within the context of this rapacity. Not only because that is how the film is structured, but also because the articulation of this structure supports the bourgeois axiom that sex is power. The opening scenes of the film clearly establish power relationships. I wish to show how these power relationships are the motor of the romantic triangle that then takes over.

Semple begins his story at dockside in exotic Surabaya, which would appear to be on the southern edge of the ocean of myth. On the deck of the Petrox Explorer, the giant oil firm's well equipped research vessel stands Fred Wilson (Charles Grodin), mid-management exec, the oily villain you love to hate, also well-equipped with trimmed sideburns, moustache, and Safari jacket. As soon as Fred says, "This is it. This time we're after the Big One," the phallic humor of the film is established. In the comic language of euphemism (PG rating) the film will exploit sexual nuances that the earlier film merely sketched and appended to its more compelling racist terror.

We soon learn that Fred is the 70s replacement for Carl Denham. In a scene reminiscent of WWII pre-flight bomber briefings, we find that Petrox's bribery of White House officials has produced a satellite scan that indicates an unknown island with (on a scientifically informed guess) a huge reserve of oil. Denham's goals, in the modest movie tradition of the 30s hustler, are now magnified in Fred Wilson to the post-Watergate level of corporate greed. Instead of a daring way to make a hokey adventure flick, the Skull Island operation becomes a military invasion. The only one who calls Fred's presumption into question is a stowaway who looks like a sensitive jock turned bearded hippie. Fred is

sure he's a Shell spy — but no, after an electronic security check, it's Jack Prescott, anxious to test his hypothesis of a huge man-like beast on the mysterious island. "Ape-shit," says Fred. Later the outraged Jack accuses Fred and the Petrox expedition of committing "environmental rape" on the island.

Semple draws the parameters of his critique from this overdrawn conflict between Jack and Fred. Director John Guillermin overloads this long briefing scene with a spurious technological ingenuity, the kind audiences have become inured to since the James Bond film. (3) Clearly, we associate Fred with this expensive junk while Jack, without it, is reduced to zero. On the one hand, Fred has all the armor so the balance of power is never in question. Script references to bribery, profiteering, and general corporate creepiness serve the aim of producing a mood of cynical acceptance when the possibility of change appears to be so negligible. You can't beat people who have satellites for playthings. On the one hand, Jack's powerlessness ennobles him because he's so admirably foolhardy. At best his ecological, anthropological, and moral protest might give us an issue to root for. Semple never goes overboard — he limits Jack to colorful acts of derring-do.

Fred, then, holds all the cards, including, it appears, the queen of hearts. For up to this comic-book duel, up to this imperialist barge, floats Dwan. She was aboard a pleasure-craft when it exploded accidentally. After being snared from a bit of wreckage she explains how she missed instant drowning only by her refusal to watch DEEP THROAT below with a movie producer (now on the ocean floor).

Dwan's fortuitous appearance short-circuits the topical political satire and returns the film to its primary source in myth. (From the greasy dishwater of corporate villainy bubbles the ivory soap of sexual-romantic myth.) The visual style of Dwan's appearance — unconscious, in a clinging wet black gown — incarnates a male sexual fantasy. How far has she floated from pornography? Once the characters finally reach the island she races ahead of the others, even Jack, snapping her with his motor-driven Nikon. With the irresistible allure of a Siren, she leads the men to their doom. With Dwan, director Guillermin renews the banished imagery of the glamour-girl in American film. Jessica Lange's body receives the star treatment as no woman's body has since Marilyn Monroe. Dwan's initial scenes, bereft of dramatic content, are in fact a direct rip off of images of Monroe that have been purveyed in the years since her death — particularly the candid *Life* magazine photos of Monroe on the beach in shorts. While Lange fortunately does not imitate Monroe's mannerisms, except for a constant dreamy expression, Guillermin films her to evoke the same narcissistic charm of the "born" tease. The lyrical cinematographic descriptiveness of her scenes while being dressed by the sailors aboard ship are prescriptive. The scenes exude a false perfection of pleasure common to the best TV commercials that market a manufactured stereotype of beauty.

KING KONG goes on to exploit the substance of the Monroe myth as

well as its form. Narrative themes of damaged innocence, potential rape, vulnerability, the restless search for identity in fame, and the terrifying response of the masses appear throughout the rest of the film in Dwan's ceaseless shuttle from Kong, to Jack, to Fred. The ideology of woman as property, of woman as the essential attribute of male power and fantasies of power obscures the social corruption alluded to in the first part of the film.

DWAN & KONG

In their first scenes on the island both Kings promise a collision of cultures — and both renege. Modern humankind never meets primeval humankind, instead the white male meets the monsters of his past, the rear projections of his fears and desires. Both films use coded racist portrayal of the black man's rape of a white woman to provide sensationalist psychological appeal. But the style with which Kong keeps his grip on Ann suggests different possibilities than the modern Kong's possession of Dwan. The long series of model animation battles between Kong and a zoo full of prehistoric monsters reduced the relationship between Ann and Kong to a series of prolonged screams. Furthermore, Fay Wray's indelible scream portrayed her unswerving resistance to Kong.

But now in 1977 "the most exciting original motion picture event in history" [\(4\)](#) has returned, and every return has its lesson. Obviously the black man's rape of the blonde is an enduring Hollywood fantasy. So enduring that Semple eliminates the terror and Guillermin confines himself to shots of a giant black pole sliding into the gate of the island fortress. The filmmakers turn the possibility of rape into the foundations of a relationship. Dwan has one touching emotional scene after another with her captor — scenes without parallel in those with Jack or Fred. Particular care is taken technically to humanize Kong's face — he effortlessly expresses a wider range of emotion than either Nicholson or Brando in the recent *THE MISSOURI BREAKS*, for example.

The anthropomorphizing of the beast is essential to the "humanizing" of the rape theme. More than one critic has suggested that in both versions Kong has no genitals because he's a walking genital, every male's erection on the rampage, desire without conscience. The twist of the new Kong is that he not only has a conscience — but a consciousness as well. This Kong could have his way and he doesn't.

The old version is careful to show that Jack rescues Ann before the unmentionable can occur — and equally careful to show Ann's terror and loathing. The new version turns the possibility of rape into a series of dirty jokes. Dwan's flirtatious slaps and coy insults (she calls Kong a "male chauvinist ape" at one point) reinforces the self-serving male image of the woman (literally ripped from her pedestal) as a tease. This characterization lends gross credence to the male belief that the woman asks to be raped. Furthermore the gentle ape responds to her teasing with abject devotion. When Kong begins to strip Dwan's clothing, the male audience can enjoy the fantasy of rape without its brutalized and

brutalizing effects. (This distinguishes KONG, psychologically speaking, from the wave of rape films that emphasize the brutality.) The penis has more meaning as a symbol of power than as an instrument of desire. Kong as penis-symbol ritualizes an act which is, in fact, ritualistic only for the perpetrator — never for the victim.

The new Kong is characterized not as a beast but as a noble savage. He presents Dwan with a panoply of generous gestures. Is she filthy after a rough night in the jungle? He takes her to the local waterfall for a dip and ingenuously blows her dry. (More innocent titillation for the audience.) When she falls into his cage aboard ship, doesn't he catch her and then allow her freedom — clearly sensing his loss of appeal when it is he that is imprisoned rather than she. And when she's surrounded by photographers in the stadium in New York, he breaks free to help her. Sure he's possessive — but what male isn't? This last incident is consistent with the plot of the first KONG, but Semple has again turned an uncoded and undeveloped suggestion latent in the original into an aspect of Kong's character. Dwan herself falls half in love with the beast — he exudes so much human warmth. Atop the World Trade Center she pleads with him to take her back into his grip so that the helicopters won't dare to attack him. In both versions Kong is a symbol of power, but in the new one much more clearly a symbol of defenseless power, the raw energy of an undeveloped resource.

DWAN & JACK

The theme of defenseless power was immortalized in the graffito "King Kong died for our sins" as well as in the mod epic MORGAN (1966) in which Kong had a cameo role. The graffito expresses the truth of a redemption worthy of the bathroom stalls on which it was written. The new Kong as well has some of this heroic stature. Jack Prescott while fantasizing being Kong has the unenviable role of trying to save Kong from himself. Prescott cheers from another skyscraper as the beast bats a copter. In the struggle for power being enacted above the great metropolis, we root in concert with the substitute hero Prescott, an essentially passive spectator. When the ultimate struggle is waged, our human alter-ego Prescott does not wage it, but his alter-ego Kong. The rebellion that characterizes Prescott is never resolved dramatically except in terms of this single shot of him cheering. This transference from the human subject to the beast refocuses the power relations that obtained in the beginning of the film from the rational but powerless to the irrational but powerful, from Jack to Kong. Jack and Kong balance each other in such a way as to cancel the possibility of meaningful or truly rebellious action. I would speculate that one of the main functions of self-enclosed bourgeois narratives such as Semple's KONG is to preclude any such potential, normally by offering hopelessness in the most energized forms.

In the earlier film Jack Driscoll's function is to do battle with Kong, to bring the story back to its human (i.e., bourgeois) roots in the end by rescuing and repossessing Ann. But Prescott in the new KONG is not

just the ape's rival — he's an image of Kong on a smaller scale and identifies with him. (Maybe Jack is the only one in the film who's seen the first KING KONG.) Dwan may sincerely love Prescott but it's Kong she's attracted to. Several scenes confronting us with the frustrating fact of coitus interruptus (Dwan and Jack just never get it together) show Dwan leaving Jack for Kong. Jack draws the obvious lesson and tells Dwan that she could never reconcile herself to the life of a professor's wife. Dwan is never given a clear choice, of course. The script hedges every situation so as to suggest that she prefers the road to stardom — but she continues to the end to deny it. This is the other side of the falsely heroic theme of redemption. Prescott wishes to possess Dwan, that is, to turn her into a useful commodity as a professor's wife, but she resists this effort at possession. (I love you Jack, but what about Kong — and fame, etc.)

Semple waits for the final shot of the film to resolve this dilemma. Jack has wished all along to redeem Dwan from the ignominious glories of stardom. He is her indefatigable rescuer, a key male role in American films. All of a sudden, Kong's dead, the preying ugly crowd (more menacing than the savages of Skull Island) is massing round his hulk, Dwan surrounded and in tears calls for him. This is the moment of romantic authenticity necessary in every Hollywood movie worthy of the name. But Jack renounces her — failing to fight through the crowd. Denied the scenario of seduction and betrayal, Jack opts for the more abstract and no doubt generally unnoticed game of redemption and renunciation. He literally turns his back on her. Semple is here at last accurate in his portrayal of the phony environmentalist and daredevil jock academic, whose heart is on his tattered sleeve and whose brains are padlocked in some sweaty locker-room at Princeton. The woman is sacrificed at Skull Island (in the mythic and anthropological realm of the noble savage) and sacrificed again on Manhattan Island. Of course it's only Prescott who connects the two — with his prescience and Nikon-sharp memory, he notices the resemblance between the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the twin crags that mark Kong's lair on Skull Island. Jack's sacrifice to the crowd reverberates as the intellectual (or academic, or petit — bourgeois) willingness to bypass struggle, once verbal protest has appeared ineffectual. Prescott is prey to a deadly passivity.

The pawn in this fantasy is always the woman. Possession of Dwan is a sign of power. The initial item of exchange between the natives of the island and the invading Petrox team is the proposed exchange of Dwan for five native women. (This also occurs in the original.) Woman is the first and vital term or sign of exchange whether with Kong or with Jack (who gives her up to the crowd in exchange for sheet principle.) When Lévi-Strauss adduces the exchange of women as the primal act of human communication between social groups, he refuses to draw any anti-female conclusions from this supposed fact. Lévi-Strauss argues that women cannot be reduced to the status of sign, since unlike things, women have the power of speech. However, in a discourse controlled and distributed by men (patriarchal culture) women's power of speech

tends to be mystified and/or dependent. In the grotesque (cultural) case of KONG, Dwan is clearly drugged during the sacrifice to the beast and clearly defenseless during the sacrifice to the New York crowd. In KING KONG at least such exchange is a power relation, not merely an item inaugurating communication.

DWAN & FRED

The significance of this exchange of Dwan as a marker among males is given its crassest form with the unambiguous Fred, the Petrox greed-freak. He recruits Dwan in the service of the multinational corporation, which totally replaces the outmoded economic forms of the Depression. Fred has the only unsentimentalized view of Kong. He stages a reenactment of the original sacrifice of Dwan in a New York stadium. His image of the penis-beast is apotheosized by the gigantic fuel pump in which Kong appears in the stadium before the glamorized Dwan. Since the pump is unveiled at the very moment we expect to see Kong (it is actually the shroud of his cage), this funny image is the one visual coup of the entire film. The reenactment explicitly draws a parallel between Kong's function as a ritual fertility god and his function as spectacular commodity.

Alone among all the males in the picture, Fred does not evidence desire for Dwan. Use value is totally obliterated by exchange value. Ironically robbed of his intention to sack the oil resources of the island, he takes from the natives their one true resource, Kong, and turns to promoting the beast as a new version of the tiger in your tank. He signs Dwan to a contract (which Jack spurns) and she becomes an element of spectacle. This again is a recreation of a motif from the original: just showbiz, but showbiz in the service of Petrox this time. The satire is so glib it's barely worth mentioning except to indicate, on the one hand, the role of Kong, the pump that spurts fuel instead of sperm, and on the other hand, the role of Dwan, potential victim this time of a different kind of rape, a violence that returns her to the Marilyn Monroe myth — that of vulnerability in the midst of the ravenous crowd. In the Petrox grip, Kong, Dwan, and the masses (depicted as a crazed mob) become totally exploitable.

In the emotional equation Kong absorbs all the tears. Dwan is again merely an element of exchange. Kong is treated throughout the film successively as ecological resource, ritual god, benevolent beast-boy, spectacular commodity; but of course he is nowhere depicted as what he is materially: a machine. The film is technically crude enough so that I was seldom tempted to think of him as anything but a machine, a very lively and emotional machine, somewhat more human than most of the other characters in the film. The image of the machine as a noble savage suggests in a way the entry of a new conception of human nature, similar to the film's fatuously critical conception of the new economic model of the multinational corporation. This entry, which I offer, tentatively, is flanked in American film and television by the vogue of the occult, which depicts human nature as less than human (depraved)

by invoking the supernatural; and on the other side, by the bionic wave of sci-fi films which depict human nature as machine-like by invoking the super-terrestrial (or the futuristic wonders of "science"). The new KING KONG can be seen as the most convincing demonstration to date that machines are now more human than mere human beings. (5)

The pivot of the narrative in each of these possibilities is typically the young beautiful white woman. CARRIE, KING KONG, DEMON SEED are three examples which could easily be multiplied. Advanced capitalism is once again tirelessly discovering new ideological forms to encompass perceived threats to its hegemony. The patriarchal structures which permeate advanced capitalism (and to which women are inevitably most sensitive) are the object of hostile offensives in almost completely mystified forms in these narratives — each of which has a doomsday theme, each of which thoroughly represses the perceived threat. By totally identifying personal (sexual) relations with power relations, by absolutizing sexuality so that it becomes bestial and power so that it becomes mechanism, the new KONG with pure negativism reluctantly lays bare the vacuum of everyday life.

The new KONG's ending is strictly repressive, shirking Hollywood's responsibility for wish fulfillment and not even conceding a return to bourgeois values. One can only conclude that it has no values to uphold. To that extent it does not end — it stops. The loss of hope marks it as a film of the 70s. No resolution of the issues it engenders is imaginable. The movie leaves us with an image of a woman in tears stranded beside a male beast while the crowd presses in upon her. Most of the disaster films end with a shot of the site of destruction. The camera moves from a close up with accelerating speed to an all-encompassing shot that ends with us, sometimes a mile in the air, looking down magisterially on ruin.

NOTES

1. Semple appears to have sustained this tone for some time: he's responsible for the scripts of both BATMAN (1966) and PRETTY POISON (1968).

2. See Judith Mayne, "KING KONG and the Ideology of Spectacle," *Quarterly Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (November, 1976), pp. 373-387.

3. This hardware overkill is characteristic of Guillermin, who made the male action epics, THE BLUE MAX (1966) and THE BRIDGE AT REMAGEN (1969), not to mention the disaster flicks, SKYJACKED (1972) and THE TOWERING INFERNO (1974).

4. According to producer Dino di Laurentis' myopic copywriters.

5. This misperception is now dated by the appearance of Seethreepio and Artoodeetoo in STAR WARS.

Lumière Lots of glitter, but ...

by Phyllis Shearer

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LUMIÈRE glitters but does not illuminate its subject, women actresses. Writer-director-star of the film, Jeanne Moreau, has given us a lush, pretty movie that is intellectually out of focus. We see privileged women languishing on the pedestal of success as the film pretends to explore the intersection of their roles as actresses and as women. But LUMIÈRE just flavors the ideas it provokes with a touch of this and a dab of that, never raising any essential interpretation of its own subject.

There is little humor or anguish in LUMIÈRE that might explain the characters it pretends to study. In the role she herself plays, Moreau only touches slightly on a certain ennui felt in being at the top of one's profession. In a succession of vignettes about four movie actresses, the film simply centers around how they feel about who they are as women — especially privileged women.

At the film's opening they meet at Moreau's summer home for a respite from their work. There they share confessional conversations as they drink wine and eat elegant food in a hilltop house overlooking a lake. They imply that only they, as actresses, can appreciate their special secrets. All their discussions revolve around men they have known — fathers, first lovers, husbands, ex-husbands, and current lovers. Gradually it becomes apparent that men, over other influences, define them. The film never suggests that these women might have achieved their success without men. Moreau isn't concerned with how skilled, accomplished actresses function in their professional and private lives, but with how it feels to be a part of an exclusive group.

We keep wanting to see another dimension of the women. Moreau establishes the framework without furnishing the detail. She does not show us whole people at all but merely subdivides and classifies her characters into types, especially into categories that favor the sensuous part of a woman. Two of the actresses are mothers (Francine Racette and Lucia Bose) but we never know what demands their families make

on them. Another actress (Caroline Cartier) spends most of the movie bickering with a jealous boyfriend. The fourth, played by Jeanne Moreau, is everybody's darling, the clichéd "toast of Paris" — the *bonne vivante* of the movie world. These "European" stereotypes show us people who are sought-after women first and actresses second.

When famous actress takes on the project of directing a film about actresses' lives, she could demystify the glamorous aspect of what most of us know in truth to be hard work. Furthermore, if, as Moreau maintains, women talk to women better than to men, why isn't LUMIÈRE talking directly and honestly to women instead of hiding behind fluff and opulence? Actresses and women directors (when they finally get the chance through their own projects) need to force the movie industry to free their image from the stereotypical modes of the past. Although actresses today consistently bemoan the parts offered them, LUMIÈRE provides nothing new. Shirley MacLaine, for one, has discussed this problem in terms of her own career.

"The only good parts I ever got were hookers ... Naturally, I took them because I wanted to be successful. That's why I'm an expert in victims. They were the best parts. And when I woke up — sociologically, politically, and creatively — I could no longer take those parts and look in the mirror." [\(1\)](#)

Actresses have to make compromises in their choice of roles, but Moreau does not either raise this issue within her film or do much as a director to change it. Ellen Burstyn abhors this aspect of movie making and what it does to audiences.

"We've seen enough of women as whores, boring wives, insipid, frightened little Jane Austen characters, or the instruments of destruction ... I don't think actresses should be unaware of what they're contributing to. People get their ideas about life from the movies. I got my idea of life from the movies more than I did from life. What are we offering to girls? Whores, boring mothers... If women in films are willing to do something about it — instead of sitting back and saying, 'they're writing songs of love, but not for me,' a great deal can be accomplished." [\(2\)](#)

Moreau is also not honest in LUMIÈRE about the competition actresses must engage in to get the occasional good part. In her film the women exhibit a strong camaraderie and understanding for each other. How did it get that way? How do these women as a group, or individually, deal with the abuses, the disappointments, and the scarcity of good roles the industry offers them? How could these protagonists arrive at such a state of union and harmony?

LUMIÈRE depicts a little-girl world with women who act baffled by the complexities that surround them. Moreau does not analyze the real complexities — she ignores them. Innocence prevails. The women stay young and beautiful, albeit with a limited consciousness, forever. In keeping with this tone, Moreau avoids close ups of Lucia Bose, who

portrays an over-forty actress who is pregnant and worried as she tries to understand her fading beauty, her wandering husband and her two growing children. These very real and recognizable circumstances are ones many women experience but they are uncomfortable to Moreau's camera. In distant long shots, Bose's facial details are lost and buried against the background. We may not look too closely at this woman's pain, for an aging face and perhaps some wrinkles would fill the frame.

Jeanne Moreau seems to keep playing her Catherine in JULES AND JIM — a little older and more seasoned, but sadly no wiser. In Truffaut's hands the complex Catherine was always an enigma whose childish, egocentric will prevailed because of her selfishness. Yet feminist filmmakers cannot "inherit" and easily integrate into their work those images of women produced by classic cinema, even when those images are supposedly positive. Here those images and LUMIÈRE itself reconstruct the typical social relation of male directors to actresses. In LUMIÈRE Moreau gives herself a more generous role to play than Catherine but maintains her position of power, for as director and writer she has created the other roles to suit her narcissism. All the women in the film are alter egos of herself.

The men's roles are as vapid as the women's. Moreau has a friendship with a scientist (François Simon) who loves her. She seeks his scholarly perseverance in trying to cure a disease never mentioned, but he never comes to function as a whole person. In the plot he is merely an elegant addendum, some cultivated touch to raise Moreau's movie star's self-esteem. Keith Carradine, the only U.S. actor in the film, seems to represent American decadence, in contrast to the Parisian variety, as he confidently tries to seduce one of the actresses in clumsy French with clumsy gestures. These facile, one-dimensional portraits are either offensive or a total bore, or both.

The many mirrors in LUMIÈRE reflect more than glossy surfaces, but the visual images stay superficial and one-sided. There is a positive surfeit of beds. So much centers around the bedroom. Moreau receives and makes phone calls to her lovers from her king-size bed. Meaningful confessional conversations between women occur as they sit on beds. The young bickering couple, he stewing with jealous accusations, she tight-lipped and incensed, argue, guess where? What is Moreau saying with all these beds and bedrooms? Like hiding places existing by themselves, they seem intended as a respite but also as some curious lifeline to the movie's message about women. Again and again, Moreau reinforces the sensual side of a woman's nature by having half of her hidden under the covers. Is a woman more womanly, more inviting as a person, more appealing couched cozily in a bed? Is that her best physical attitude? If so, it was better done in 1938 with DINNER AT EIGHT, which did not take itself nearly as seriously as LUMIÈRE does. When Jean Harlow, propped up in bed, played coy, we knew it was an act. She oozed ambition from behind that coy facade and from beneath those silk sheets. Snarling at her maid in one breath, cooing at her oafish husband and trying to get what she wanted in the next. And then, pretending

sophistication on the telephone while speaking with a sought-after hostess, she revealed her aggression and ambition. Harlow's bedroom perfectly framed her strategy for upward social mobility. Moreau's bedrooms are a pretense, a fraud, aimed only at sensuality in a vacuum.

Finally, the movie disappoints us precisely in this regard — about what it means to be an actress. We do get an occasional glimpse of Moreau's character on the movie set, at which time *LUMIÈRE* is about a movie within a movie. The cameras, the technicians, the complicated lighting equipment, the large crew all assemble for us to see. But as with the opening sequences at the summer home, these sequences do not show the bustle and activity of a movie set but have a deadness of composition and design. We do not see Moreau's character working at her craft, but rather in the last scene of the film, she sits carefully poised before a camera for a screen test.

This is the real work situation — the relationship between film actresses as workers among other workers — which Moreau could have explored and did not. However, the way in which she chose not to do this is instructive for feminist filmmaking. Instead of exploring how people work together when they make films, she focused in on the individual sensitive woman. That emphasis on the subjective and personal to the exclusion of everything else serves to reinforce the vulgar notion of what belongs to a woman's world and to a woman's art.

Recently informed of the death of her friend, the scientist (a suicide when he discovered that he was dying), Moreau collapses into tears, submitting to her grief. Apologizing to the camera crew and lighting technicians, she attempts to regain composure for the test. The scene ends and goes to black, ending the movie. Are these tears of recognition for not caring more for her friend? Are they part of knowing she has been thoughtless? Does this moment stun Moreau into reality — one she cannot act out? If the camera continued running would it capture a true or manipulated grief. Or is this sequence portraying "the show must go on" brand of reality? When I got to that point in *LUMIÈRE*, I realized that I was making up my own scenario.

Unfortunately, the film's ending was for me its beginning. That was when it started saying something complex about the life of an actress. But too little, too late. Freeze frame, cut, go to credits.

Notes:

[1.](#) Lee Israel, "Saving An Endangered Species," *Ms.*, No. 8 (February, 1975) p. 55.

[2.](#) p. 56.

Twilight's Last Gleaming Aldrich's paranoid vision

by Joe Heuman

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It's November 16, 1981. Four escaped convicts, led by an ex-Air Force general (railroaded into prison by the military for his outspoken political beliefs), have captured a Titan missile silo in Montana. "Gentlemen, ex-General Dell announces to his compatriots, "we are now a superpower." The group (now down to three after Dell shoots one accomplice for being too violent) demands ten million dollars in ransom. They also want the Chief Executive as a hostage, in order to secure their safe passage out of the States. Finally, Dell requires the President to go on national TV to read National Security Document 9759. This paper is a record of the minutes of a 1961 policy meeting, at which American officials crystallized the strategy for the nation's involvement in the Vietnam conflict.

Though the Vietnam debacle is long past, Dell is convinced that America is still torn apart by the dissension over the fiasco. He wants to reveal the truth to the people, so they will understand the duplicity of high government officialdom. That's why he was set up for a prison term-by a powerful conspiracy that enforces silence.

The document would show that high government executives knew a limited war in Southeast Asia could never be won, but that it was fought anyway, for the purpose of proving to the Russians that the U.S. was able and willing to wage a brutal limited conflict, complete with atrocities, in order to maintain a buffer of fear between the two super-powers.

Newly elected, President Stevens has no knowledge of the document's existence. After reading it he realizes that it was formulated by members of his own cabinet. He queries his brain-trust and understands that they would rather let him die as a hostage, or have the world blown apart, than reveal their own guilt. There are intimations that vast powers outside the legal order are involved.

This is the basic premise of TWILIGHT'S LAST GLEAMING, a film which was heralded by a huge national ad campaign but then pulled from circulation in less than a month's time, after flopping badly at the box-office. An independent production, financed with American and West German money, TWILIGHT was presented not in the hope of explaining the Vietnam war, but with a frank desire for commercial success. The notion that anyone could swallow such a limited and conspiratorial explanation of the war is not important to the film. It appears that Robert Aldrich, as director, had no interest in exploring the calculated attempt to subjugate a portion of the world to a specific economic order. He has offered this reactionary, revisionist view of Vietnamese history as part of the paranoid vision of the film, one that is meant to involve the audience in an "exciting" drama of heroes battling unseen relentless power. To this end, he combined the premise with a melodramatic script, a semi-factual scenario (complete with realistic technological gadgets) and a split-screen technique that foregoes conventional cutting for direct simultaneity of action (in two to four places), all of which were supposed to blend into the magic of "box-office entertainment." The fact that they didn't is of some interest to me, but my speculations on the reason for the failure must depend upon a closer look at both the film and its director.

The paranoid vision of TWILIGHT follows a pattern established by earlier Aldrich films (KISS ME DEADLY, ATTACK, TEN SECONDS TO HELL) where individuals struggle against an unyielding system that is constantly conspiring to gain control of their freedom and personal will. In this context the term "paranoia" is not intended as a diagnosis of organic disease. In fact, I would claim this kind of paranoia is a defense mechanism which many individuals have built up against a society that demands conformism — even to those collective beliefs that are based on obvious falsehoods and manipulated facts, such as (1) the Vietnam war, (2) the necessity of a \$100 billion defense budget, or (3) the theory of the "lone assassin" in relationship to the killings of the two Kennedys and Martin Luther King.

This kind of paranoid vision requires care in its construction and completion. It must be contrived so that viewers will accept it on its own terms, as rational and inevitable. It operates according to a rigid logic of its own. But in TWILIGHT, which was designed as entertainment, the logic of paranoia exists alongside that of a conventionally plotted thriller. The former provides the premise, while the latter determines the course of the action, and the two do not appear to be in conflict until the end of the film, when the protagonist falls completely out of character.

The obsessive ex-General Dell has spent years planning his scheme. He is portrayed as strong, cunning and resourceful, and yet he commits a low-grade blunder during the escape, which results in total catastrophe for his mission. He allows himself, his remaining comrade and the President to become needlessly exposed to riflemen as they make their way out of the missile silo. There is no reason for Dell's lapse of

intelligence, at least within the logic of the plot, and Aldrich is too shrewd to allow for such a gross inconsistency unless he intended to show a rupture in Dell's character.

After realizing that the forces opposing him (known ominously as The Power) are willing to sacrifice the President, Dell wants to activate the missiles in a retaliatory rage. The other surviving member of the team, a Black lifer named Willis, refuses to cooperate, and since it takes both of them to manipulate the controls, Dell is immobilized. Willis' motivation stems from his comprehension of the magnitude of the forces they face ("We took on The Power," he says at one point) and from a reluctance to destroy the world because of personal frustration and pain.

The ex-general's fantasy that American power resides in, and springs forth magically from the President has been revealed as a sham. It is the fatal flaw in his scheme. His subsequent blunder (akin to a breakdown) occurs because he couldn't extend his fears or his demands far enough. He failed to locate the real source of control, and so his threat to blow up the world is not enough of a trump card. And if the fact that he is willing to destroy the planet (and able to do it) won't move his enemy to concessions, what would? The lack of credibility extends not only to the sudden break in his character in terms of the plot, but also to the final invalidity of his vision (his conviction that the exposure of the document would make a difference). In a sense the film has jettisoned its hero. Aldrich must have been conscious that such an ending would destroy the plausibility of the film.

The paranoid vision of complete control by unseen forces acquires its full sinister dimensions in light of this climax, which abruptly alters the context in which TWILIGHT may be viewed and understood. After constructing a conventional realist text, he undermines the basis of his construction (beginning, middle, end) by bringing it to an inconsistent and illogical conclusion. This is not the first time Aldrich has used formulaic filmmaking to accomplish his own ends. ATTACK had American soldiers murdering a cowardly commander, while KISS ME DEADLY made a mockery of the self-control of its macho hero, Mike Hammer, who seemed totally in command of the situation until he slipped and let the world explode in a Pandora's Box ending. These ruptures impose paranoid logic upon the text-the logic of the conventional plot becomes suspect when a portion of a supposedly solid structure changes or disappears. Pace, style, the entire sense of space and time is distorted when a movie deviates from an established and expected psychological pattern (much as in Hitchcock's PSYCHO, where the protagonist is suddenly and brutally murdered in the middle of the film).

By ending TWILIGHT the way he does, Aldrich seems to be asking that the audience deal in judgmental terms with Dell's quest for the truth. Until the ending, the film has worked to engage the audience in the action and to let us identify with the crusading protagonist, to create an emotional or psychological connection. This is part of its function as

entertainment, and entertainment is what the ad campaign, as well as the film itself, have led the audience to expect. The final rupture must come as a surprise, perhaps an unpleasant one since it destroys the credibility of the hero and severs the audience's psychological connection with him and with the movie itself. The wrong people are killed. Strange, unexplained powers survive intact. Suddenly distanced from their involvement, viewers are asked to think about things they would just as soon forget. (And who actually believes that a guy who couldn't even rob a grocery store would be able to shoot King and then make good an international escape, while the same FBI squad assigned to harass King became the investigators of the crime?)

It is understandable that audiences might have felt duped by this film. First we are asked to do one thing (as passive receivers) and then something completely different (as active participants). We are manipulated into an awareness that we have been participating in a contrived fiction. We are shown that the logic of Hollywood (plot, character, editing, lighting, sound) has nothing to do with the frightening idea of a well-directed conspiracy. Forced to switch roles, the audience has been maneuvered into a critical relationship with the film text. And while this is valid and demanding as a viewing experience, in the case of TWILIGHT it spelled disaster for the money men. Many filmgoers do not enjoy being fooled, and we aren't comfortable outside the logic of the conventionally plotted film. Faced with the necessity of taking a critical stance, we are likely to dismiss the film as bad and think no more about it. And since TWILIGHT was produced and marketed with a mass audience in mind, it became a commercial failure.

What Aldrich has created is neither a simple entertainment nor a serious explanation of history (I certainly wouldn't recommend the film as history — past, present, or future), but rather an expensive and successful joke. (Paranoids can and do have a sense of humor, however weird it may be.) Attacked by some for lacking plausibility and coherence, praised by others for telling the historical truth, TWILIGHT'S LAST GLEAMING has a purpose which is altogether different. It shows that audiences still trust and depend on the conventions of the Hollywood text, and we are uncomfortable when confronted with the contrivances of this text and with its limited ability to explain the world. We have been asked to question some of our assumptions and habits of viewing, while many other movies have attempted to train us not to question these assumptions and habits, but to accept them unthinkingly. To extend the terms of paranoid logic, we are following orders without knowing it. We are being controlled by unseen forces, and the point of Aldrich's joke is to reveal the structure of the controlling mechanism and thus make us aware of our condition.

Slap Shot Foul talk and foul deeds

by Frank Stricker

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SLAP SHOT is a film about hockey players. Its explicit rendering of the dirty words hockey players use and the bloody violence of the game have created a minor sensation. Does the film actually exploit the violence it portrays? Must we have all those dirty words up there on the screen? For different reasons, the answers are affirmative in both cases. SLAP SHOT does not know what it wants to say about violence, and, oddly, what saves the film are the dirty words.

SLAP SHOT deals with the Charlestown Chiefs, a minor league hockey team led by player-coach Reggie Dunlop (Paul Newman). Charlestown is a steel town, and when the Chiefs learn that the mill is shutting down, they fear their own end. Already on the skids, they await a further drop in box office sales.

Meanwhile, the film touches on the relationships of athletes and their wives. Princeton educated forward, Ned Braden (Michael Ontkean), is the sensitive humanist unwilling to sell out his talents for the sake of the box office. He is not getting along with his wife Lily (Lindsay Crouse), who drinks a lot, wears rough clothes, and is deeply unhappy. The film wants us to sympathize with her and the other wives, but we never really find out what is going on with the Bradens. Ned seems a nice enough fellow, but his wife apparently does not want to spend the rest of her life tagging along after her husband. On a general level, SLAP SHOT suggests that professional athletes are incapable of mature relationships with women.

Much of the film involves Reggie Dunlop's attempt to save the team and his career. He tries to discover who owns the team; he floats a rumor that someone in Florida will buy the team. He sleeps with the wife of an opposing goalie and she tells him that she often sleeps with women (suggesting again that male athletes are incapable of deep relationships with women and even worse that "a good fuck" can straighten out a lesbian). When the two teams meet, Newman uses this bit of

information to rile the opposing goalie and win the game. Later Newman sends in three young players to start pushing the other teams around. From here on, the violence level rises, the blood spurts, and the story sorely tests our sense of reality.

There is plenty of violence in professional hockey, but in *SLAP SHOT* the violence bears little relationship to winning; often it is totally arbitrary, erupting even before the game is underway. And there is a great deal of it. So little time is left for scoring goals that it is hard to know how the Chiefs get their win-streak going.

SLAP SHOT takes an odd stance toward the game of hockey. It does put you down on the ice, but it shows none of the skill or dedication of the athletes. In hockey there can be a wonderful combination of grace and muscle — a ballet of the brawny. And there is a tremendous release of tension when, finally, after scrambling and pushing and shoving, the puck slips into the net, the red light goes on, and the players raise their sticks in celebration. *SLAP SHOT* presents little of the game's drama or athletic skill. In fact, it actually plays to the basest impulses that move hockey fans.

Violence puts the Chiefs into contention for the championship. Reggie Dunlop hopes that the team's success will save it, but when he visits the club's owner (Kathryn Walker), she tells him that the team will fold because it is more valuable to her as a tax write-off than as a going concern. She tells Dunlop to his face that television violence influences children and she certainly would never allow her children to watch a hockey game. Dunlop exits with an obscenity and we sympathize with his outrage.

This is a climactic scene in the film. Scriptwriter Nancy Dowd told the *Los Angeles Times* that what really interested her was who profited from violence in sports ("She Put the Words in Slap Shot's Mouth," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, March 20, 1977). But aside from making the obvious but important point that the ruling class profits from its employees and cares nothing for their welfare, the scene is superficial. A far more interesting point is how the whole ruling class benefits from the release of aggression in sports and the media. Dowd's point, focused on the immediate self-interest of the owner, remains at the level of muckraking.

Following the scene, Dunlop returns to his team with a new message. If they are going to fold, they will go out in style. Rather unconvincingly, he preaches that violence is bad stuff. At this point, the film's comic-book qualities finally overwhelm any sense of reality it has. Instead of a resolution, we get a fantasy of villainy and innocence, and a structure of flips and flops.

In the final championship game, the opposing team mercilessly pummels the Chiefs. The Chiefs decide to come out fighting in the second period — all except for Ned Braden who sits alone on the bench. Suddenly his wife, having shed her army jacket and now done up

conventionally like the other wives, appears in the stands. Apparently inspired by this "real woman," Braden skates around the ice doing a strip tease. A villain from the opposing team stops beating on the Chiefs long enough to notice and complains to the officials: "Make him stop that! That's disgusting!" (The moral for the audience of course is the opposite: violence is more obscene than this innocent nudity). The villain pushes the official who — enter the *deus ex machina* — promises that the game will be forfeited to the Chiefs if he shoves once more. Of course he does and the Chiefs win the championship.

Everything seems to end right and we are supposed to share in the Chiefs' elation. But what has been said about violence and success in sports is impossibly muddled. Violence brought the Chiefs into the playoffs, even if it took the gesture of a flower child, stripping down to his athletic supporter, to win the series. Where is the message of this film that seems to have so many messages?

There has been much debate about the foul talk and violence in the film. Apparently director George Roy Hill had to fight with Universal to keep the dirty words. And he was right. In terms of realism, this is it. Athletes, especially hockey players, cannot exhale without emitting an obscenity. And we all know that in real life people do talk dirty. Moreover, in the film the point seems to be that the players talk a lot about fucking, but are unable to maintain fulfilling relationships with women.

But while the dirty language adds a great deal to the film's realism it is also the locus of the film's nearly rabid anti-gayness (the perfect film for Anita Bryant). To begin with the men continually abuse each other as sissies and cocksuckers. While this homophobia is typical among American athletes, to reproduce it uncritically in the film and give it the added support of Paul Newman, a noted Hollywood liberal, is disgusting and lends support to the men who beat up and kill gay men all over the country.

The violence is another question. Critics have attacked SLAP SHOT for exploiting the very thing it seems to deal with. And they are right. Both the scriptwriter and the director have argued that since there are no rapes or weapons or serious injuries, this is not a violent film. (*L.A. Times Calendar*, March 20, 1977). In that case they have committed a non sequitur. The violence is so bloody it should have resulted in serious injuries. In further defending his film, director Hill also claimed that the violence is "cartoon violence", treated farcically. In fact, the most graphic scenes are the bloodiest. Sometimes the characters involved and the occasions for violence are silly and arbitrary. But the fisticuffs and blood seem terribly real.

Whether it intends to or not, the film raises a major question about sports violence: why do audiences want blood? Here the film fails abysmally. It might have observed the lives of the people who watch sports. Since this film takes place in a steel town, why not show us the inside of a steel mill? Why not suggest something of the web of authoritarian relationships, the boring labor, and the waning

community life that affect many American workers, repressing their instincts for expression and assertion? The nearest this film comes to catching working-class reality is in the words of a player who fears the team may fold: "Fucking Chrysler Plant, here I come."

Dowd claimed that she did not want to make a big statement about Violence, even though violence seems to overwhelm the film. What about her lesser purpose of showing that "the violence we have in our entertainment is the thing that prevents people, especially men, from growing up" ("Four-Letter Screenwriter," *Newsweek*, March 7, 1977)? The film gives us no insight into why men — or the people who come to watch them bang each other around — are violent. It equates violence, adolescence, and bad vision by making the most aggressive players three young brothers who wear thick glasses and still play with toys. But this is a cartoon rather than an explanation. It is not self-evident that men fail to "grow up" because of the violence in their sports. It is rather more likely that the violence, crimped emotional life, and the blatantly anti-gay feelings which the men in this film display, derive from the structure and ideology of sexism and capitalist competitiveness. To state the obvious, violence is not a cause but a result of something larger and deeper.

It appears that what brought this film to life was the following: through her brother, a minor league hockey player, Nancy Dowd found out that athletes talk dirty. Fascinated, she taped their every word, and, with a vaguely feminist impulse, she concocted a script that would at once play to the sports crowd while making a statement about male violence and sexism. Inevitably things get confused. The plot has more twists and turns than one can follow; it lacks real ideas. What is left is the dirty talk, cartoon portraits of violent athletes, a stab at the ruling class, and the point that violence is more obscene than dirty words. But not much more.

It's too bad. There have been a rash of sports films in the last year, and the two most popular, ROCKY and SLAP SHOT, are both ultimately shallow. ROCKY is an existentialist fantasy — the American dream with Hemingway's sensibility — a story of the dogged devotion of the little guy, and finally, of his ability to withstand punishment. SLAP SHOT is a mishmash of violence and funny dirty talk, touched with a hint of social criticism. We are still waiting for a sports film that at once communicates the appeal of sports to audiences and players, and suggests the deeper causes of its perversion in a capitalist economy.

Like a Rose Women's struggle in jail

by Robert Pest

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On the surface, *LIKE A ROSE* is a gentle, low-key film. In the opening sequence, an off-screen voice reminisces over a fairly typical collection of personal and family photographs. Only the authoritarian clang of the dinner bell, violating the affectionately nostalgic mood of this "photo album" sequence, brings us into contact with the stifling regimentation of prison life. But it is unsettling moments and jarring contrasts such as this that give *LIKE A ROSE* much of its power and conviction. For beneath its quiet, unobtrusive cinematography and delicate piano background, this black-and-white documentary undertakes a probing and insistent analysis of the concrete conditions of existence at a women's prison. More precisely, the film focuses on two inmates' views of the oppressive conditions at the Female Correctional Institution at Tipton, Missouri and on their mutual struggle to maintain their integrity and their sanity in the face of those conditions. In a skillfully integrated combination of on-camera conversations and voice-over commentaries, Peggy and Carolyn, the film's central figures, are given the opportunity to share both their experiences and their understanding of the personal and political realities of prison life.

Director Sally Barrett-Page and the other members of the feminist collective responsible for the film allow the interests and concerns of the two prisoners to determine the film's direction; the filmmakers limit themselves to visually corroborating and elaborating upon the prisoners' analysis. [\(1\)](#) As a result of this internal perspective, *LIKE A ROSE* does not suffer from the sensationalism common to other prison films, both fiction and non-fiction. Taking its focus from the prisoners themselves, the film moves instead to address the day-to-day problems and aggravations both personal and institutional, both petty and not so petty, which ultimately define the character of prison life. Because it focuses on a small, minimum security prison, *LIKE A ROSE* does not deal with the institutionalized violence and wholesale brutality which have become a way of life at larger, maximum-security prisons. But the

film does present a convincing portrait of the tedium, the lethargy, and as Carolyn puts it, "the waste," which are equally part of the oppression of prison life. Some of the issues raised in *LIKE A ROSE* deal specifically with women's prisons. But, for the most part, the film speaks eloquently against the mental decay and the physical degradation experienced by all prisoners in this nation's "correctional institutions."

Most of the discussion of prison life in the film centers on the contradiction between the rhetoric of correction and the actual conditions and programs within the prison. A sign in the Tipton facility asserts that the institution's mission is to help female offenders "re-enter society as productive wives, mothers, and employees." This view, in essence, is also articulated by the warden, who appears briefly near the end of the film to provide what can only be interpreted as an official rebuttal to some of the charges made by the prisoners. The choice of these particular roles for the women is, of course, tremendously revealing. Clearly, Tipton officials do not want their prisoners to become employers or to succeed at self-employment, nor do they want the ex-offender to exist outside the confines of marriage and motherhood. Correction at Lipton does not involve growth or development, but rather learning to accept a limited and well-defined social and economic role. Yet even in terms of its own sexist goals, Tipton is sadly deficient. As Peggy and Carolyn point out and as the filmmakers document, little if any productive activity takes place at Tipton. The lack of educational and vocational programs and the limited number of jobs within the institution pose major barriers to any kind of growth. The warden claims that many of the women in Lipton choose to "sleep their sentences away." *LIKE A ROSE* helps explain why.

Discussions about the inadequacy of prison programs tend to become discussions about money very quickly. Carolyn informs us that Lipton once had a college program but that it was discontinued due to "lack of funds." But at most institutions, and the film gives us no reason to suppose that Lipton is unique in this respect, the strawman of financial contingency is pulled out of the closet only after a significant number of prisoners get involved in college programs. For prisons are run on a master-slave or parent-child model, and prisoners who have been given the opportunity to study and to understand their situation, to articulate their dissatisfaction, and to express their rage often refuse to behave like either slaves or children. Prison educational programs are usually discontinued because they pose a serious threat to status quo relations of oppression within the institution, not because of any lack of funds. When funds are discontinued, it is often due to lobbying efforts of "law-abiding" citizens who resent the expenditure of federal or state funds to educate and train "criminals."

Like the shutdown of the college program, the employment situation at Lipton betrays the institution's real goals and priorities. According to Peggy and Carolyn, there are essentially three kinds of jobs at Tipton: in the laundry, in the kitchen, and in the sewing room. One or two individual jobs exist, such as teacher's aide in the high school

equivalency program, but these are obviously tokens and public relations gestures. The primary job opportunities conform to the sign that delineates the roles for which the women are being prepared; a prisoner who leaves Lipton is ready to cook, clean, or sew. Yet once again, even those "busy work" jobs do not provide a break from the long hours of boredom, since there is never enough work to go around. Shots of the laundry room reveal women slumped over ironing boards, playing cards, or just sitting. Thus, those who do elect to work at Lipton learn that their labor is unessential and trivial.

The economic situation of the prisoners also plays a role in the gradual destruction of any sense of self-worth. Those who have no family to provide funds receive \$2 a month from the state, \$3 after six months, for personal items. To insure that the prisoners understand that this money bears no relation to their labor or to their right to a minimal subsistence, prison officials refer to it as a "tip." Clothing also poses a major problem for those with no outside funds. The state provides only the barest essentials of the lowest quality. Everything else comes from donations of second-hand items, not always functional or in an adequate range of sizes. Certain kinds of clothing, such as gaudy, oversized "sack" dresses, stand out in the film. Thus, we come to realize that while the women at Tipton are not forced by regulation to wear standard uniforms, many of them are still forced by economic circumstance to wear ill-fitting tokens of their debased status.

Any film about a women's prison is bound to invite comparisons with men's prisons. Superficially, Lipton is a garden spot compared to all but the most exclusive, "white collar," men's institutions. Nowhere in the film do we see the ever-present machine-gun guards who walk the walls of most men's prisons. In fact, there are no walls at all, only fences. But, as Peggy perceptively argues, the contrast ends there. Admitting that Tipton seems both pleasant and peaceful, she points out that the real punishment of prison is not external but internal — being forced to leave behind the people, places, and things that once made up your life. Prison is an absence as much as, if not more than, a presence. This point is made most forcefully in the film's treatment of the "Saturday Night Dances." Carolyn ironically refers to this inmates-only event as "a real treat, complete with Kool-Aid." While she describes the general pattern of initial enthusiasm followed by a gradual withdrawal from these affairs, the normally steady camera darts nervously around the recreation room, capturing both the tension and the desperation of the participants. Neither the women sitting nor the ones dancing seem comfortable or relaxed. Like everything else at Tipton, the dances appear to be a combination of pointless activity, on the one hand, and deadening inactivity, on the other. At the end of the sequence, Carolyn simply points out that most women eventually quit going to the dances because they can't find "what they're looking for."

Unfortunately, the filmmakers do not use the dance sequence as a springboard for looking more closely at the negative aspects of human sexuality in the prison environment. The few shots of women dancing —

together in an overtly sexual way are handled quietly and discretely. One must, of course, credit the filmmakers with considerable respect for the private lives of the prisoners. But respect for the lives and preferences of others does not necessarily preclude an intelligent examination of the social and sexual pressures that women (and men) in prison must deal with. The omission of this sort of analysis is, however, consistent with the overall movement of the film and especially with the film's positive treatment of the Peggy-Carolyn relationship. The filmmakers make no attempt to conceal the strong intimate relationship between the two women. On the contrary, the choice of Peggy and Carolyn as the film's central figures involves a deliberate effort to stress the positive aspects of physical and emotional relations between women. The love, affection, and emotional support which these women share stand in sharp contrast to the manipulative, exploitative relations which prevail both in prisons and in the society as a whole. Peggy and Carolyn are able to deal with their incarceration at Lipton because of their successful relationship. Repeated shots of the two women sitting together on a small sofa serve to bring us back to this central point. Significantly, these are the only shots in the entire film in which prisoners seem even somewhat content, comfortable, or at ease. But the strength of this remarkable and beautiful relationship is captured most fully at the end of the film. When Carolyn begins to despair about the future and its limited possibilities, Peggy gently strokes her companion's hand and reassures her, "Don't you worry, baby, because we'll always come up smelling like a rose."

LIKE A ROSE is a powerful and moving film. But because of the budget limitations which determined its length and also, presumably, because of the limits on what the filmmakers were allowed to film, it is a film which avoids almost as many issues as it addresses. Even small, rural prisons like Lipton can be violent places, yet the film gives no indication of even the potential for violence. The choice of two articulate, fairly well-educated white women as the film's primary subjects must also be questioned. While their problems are, of course, both real and important, one cannot help but assume that less fortunate prisoners, white and black alike, have grievances more pressing than the absence of college courses. Fortunately, however, both Peggy and Carolyn seem to be capable of moving outside of their own situations to deal with conditions in general.

Tomato Productions was formed by a small group of women, some with experience in public television, who wanted to counter the sexist bias of both film and television. This purpose informs and helps to explain many of the collective's filmmaking choices. Peggy and Carolyn are chosen to discuss prison conditions precisely because of their intelligence and their strong, supportive relationship. By focusing on them, the filmmakers hope to call attention to what women, even in incredibly difficult situations, can accomplish. Given the general absence of such a perspective from most current film and television productions, this aggressively positive direction seems not only reasonable but also necessary. In any case, the film never attempts to

conceal or to mystify the choices that went into its making. LIKE A ROSE is an honest and sensitive film, one which avoids the pitfalls of both vulgar sensationalism and excessive polemic, and which offers instead a detailed analysis of a concrete situation. LIKE A ROSE is a film that should be seen by anyone interested in America's prisons or in women's struggles to shape their own lives. Most importantly, it should be seen both by the people who run our prisons and by the people who occupy them.

Notes:

[1.](#) Cinematography by Ellen Grant; edited by Nancy Margulies; stills by Sara Wykes; music by Anne Heath. Black and white, 26 minutes. Distributed in 16m by Tomato Productions, Box 1952, Evergreen, Colorado 80439.

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Jeanne Dielman Death in installments

by Jayne Loader

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Chantal Akerman's *JEANNE DIELMAN*, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES, recently subtitled in preparation for possible American release, is an ambiguous and difficult film but one that deserves serious consideration from both feminist and formalist critics. In presenting her portrait of a bourgeois Belgian housewife whose widowhood leads her to afternoon prostitution, Akerman elicits not only an intensely sensitive performance from Delphine Seyrig but startlingly contradictory responses from her audience as well. These responses vehemence and passion and the film's complex structure lead one to question Akerman's politics and aesthetics. And such questions can only be answered in the context of the historiography and theory of women in the home: as workers who are essential in maintaining the capitalist system through production and reproduction, largely unrecognized and unpaid. The film raises further questions in terms of its contribution to the vital task of developing feminist art and feminist film language, providing a measure of how far we have come and of what remains undone.

My own answers to these questions are not encouraging ones: I find Akerman's film not only self-defeating in its depiction of the housewife's role and her so-called regeneration through violence at the film's end, but cavalier in its treatment of the complex role of women in the family. Akerman's solution to the fact of female oppression is unfortunately a common one, which is offered not only in several other contemporary films by women but in a significant number of women's novels as well. It is violence, directed at the first male who comes to hand. By his sex rather than his person, he is forced to stand for the oppressors of all the rest.

JEANNE DIELMAN examines three days in the life of its heroine, each day consuming approximately one hour of screen space. Much of the action of the film is shot in "real time." If it takes Jeanne fifteen minutes to peel a batch of potatoes, then the fifteen minutes are presented on the

screen without a cut. Yet the moments thus shown are of necessity carefully selected; three days must be compacted into three hours, rather than 72. Much of the film and, for me, its strongest sections are about housework. Other moments capture Jeanne's interaction with her teenage son. Less time is taken up with her relations with the other people on the periphery of her life: the storekeepers who sell to her, a woman in her building whose baby she watches, the baby, neighbors on the street. She seems to have no friends. Only a small amount of time is devoted to the men who provide Jeanne's income, the clients she services as a prostitute each afternoon.

It is the housework that sticks in one's mind after the film is over and the housework that provides Jeanne's identity. The work is close to ritual, rigidly scheduled and repeated daily with slight variation and maximum efficiency. It is a process that appears impossible to sustain if one has not been at some point a housewife (or factory worker) oneself. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English describe it:

"Housework is maintenance and restoration: the daily restocking of the shelves and return of each cleaned and repaired object to its starting point in the family game of disorder. After a day's work, no matter how tiring, the housewife has produced no tangible object-except, perhaps, dinner; and that will disappear in less than half the time it took to prepare. She is not supposed to make anything, but to buy, and then to prepare or conserve what has been bought, dispelling dirt and depreciation as they creep up. And each housewife works alone."[\(1\)](#)

Since Jeanne Dielman's duties as housewife compose the bulk of the film's action, one can get a feel for the film's flow and pacing through scanning this list of them: Jeanne gets up, puts on her dressing gown, and chooses her son's clothes. She lights a fire in his room, picks up his shoes and takes them to the kitchen, where she shines them, lights the stove, grinds the coffee beans and makes coffee. She wakes her son; he eats while she dresses. She says goodbye to him, and gives him money taken from a blue and white china crock on the dining table. She washes the dishes, makes her son's bed and folds it into a couch, makes her own bed and lays a towel over her coverlet. She shops and runs errands, returns to her apartment, and begins to prepare dinner. She sits with her neighbor's child, eats her lunch, and returns the baby to its mother. The doorbell rings. She admits a man, takes his hat and coat, and leads him into the bedroom. She leads him to the front door, gives him his hat and coat, and takes money from him, which she puts in the blue china crock. She opens the window in her bedroom, puts the rumpled towel in the clothes hamper, bathes, cleans the tub, and dresses. She closes the bedroom window and takes dinner off the stove. Her son comes home. They eat dinner immediately: soup, meat and potatoes. She tells him not to read while eating. He puts his books away. She clears the table and helps him with his homework. She knits, and glances through the newspaper, until it is time for them to take their evening walk around

the block. They unfold his sofa bed. He reads while she undresses. She turns off the stove, kisses him, turns out the lights, and at last goes to sleep.

There exist subtle variations within this basic range of activities that give us clues to Jeanne's character and moods, but this structure, carefully designed and rigidly adhered to, forms the core of the film and accurately, poignantly captures the reality of housework and the housewife role for many women. Ann Oakley notes the frequency of such inflexible, self-imposed schedules in her study of contemporary English housewives, who use timetables and ritualized action in order to give their lives structure, to impart meaning to what seems to many a meaningless job:

"Faced with housework as their job, they devise rules which give the work the kind of structure most employed workers automatically find in their job situation. Having defined the rules they then attempt to adhere to them, and to derive reward from carrying them out." [\(2\)](#)

The monotony and crippling effect of such a process are powerfully illustrated in Akerman's film. We are initially bored with the film's slow pace, which admits no music, no camera movement, and no opticals as distraction. But we are ultimately carried into the rhythm of Jeanne's life: empathy is virtually unavoidable. The frustrations — so often presented as the "mad housewife" syndrome in American film and fiction about women — are absent here for the most part. Jeanne is serene, methodical, almost madonna-like as she floats efficiently, effortlessly through the day. If she feels frustrations with her role or has fantasies of escape, she represses them even, or especially, in the privacy of her own home.

The precision of Jeanne's motions is as clean and sharp as a good Swiss watch. We watch her dip veal in egg, meal and flour without a wasted movement. She is presented as an automaton, geared for maximum efficiency and functioning perfectly, a victim of both the domestic science movement and the petit-bourgeois Belgian culture that produced her. The compulsiveness of Jeanne's housecleaning, the zeal with which she attacks crumbs and disorder, the serenity with which she accomplishes her tasks all point to a woman who has internalized the principle that "neglect of housecleaning is tantamount to child abuse." [\(3\)](#) And Akerman's controlled, formal style perfectly mirrors the inner feelings of her character, forcing us visually into her world.

The most striking formal technique in *JEANNE DIELMAN* is Akerman's use of the static camera. We see Jeanne's life as if it were a painting which we have all the time in the world to study. Thus we are not manipulated by dollies in or out of space that force us to focus on some particular point of action, or by changing camera angles which hurtle us up or down emotionally. Akerman has said that she saw no reason to move the camera in her film, and for the most part I agree with her: her character's actions speak for themselves. [\(4\)](#) The static camera traps us

as completely as Jeanne's static life traps her, and studying that world, we become a part of it. The contrast between the average viewer's boredom with Jeanne's life or voyeuristic obsession with its stasis in contrast to Jeanne's glacial calm is striking. We are forced to experience Jeanne's life and wonder how she stands living it.

Since Jeanne is the heart of the film, this is expressed visually by her placement in the still frame. She is centered precisely within it, and unless she moves from one room to another, Akerman not only holds the camera steady but holds the shot as well. There are no cuts except when absolutely necessary, and Jeanne is almost always on screen. Akerman's cinema focuses our attention on her smallest gestures, gestures that reveal character but would be lost in a more flamboyant film: a knife that almost slips when a potato is peeled, a light turned off unnecessarily, a facial expression of disquiet or of frustration, the curious act of making coffee in a thermos in the morning for drinking at lunchtime. The effect of such details, repeated and ritualized, is cumulative. Slowly the portrait is pieced together.

Akerman's mise-en-scene is subtle in structuring the way we view the separate elements of the film and gradually put them together. When Jeanne returns to her apartment after a shopping trip, for example, Akerman presents the action with one long shot in the apartment hallway. The elevator that will take Jeanne upstairs is centered precisely in the middle of the frame, and mailboxes line the hall's left side. Jeanne walks into the foyer and stops to check her mail, then walks away from the camera toward the elevator, pushes the button, waits and enters it. A simple shot, but the use of a lens with very little depth of field which is focused sharply only on the foreground mailboxes changes the nature of the shot. We see Jeanne walk out of focus as she nears the elevator and stands waiting for it. As she nears her apartment, she becomes (visually) a different person. Suddenly the objects in the frame outweigh her. We concentrate on the texture of the walls sharply in focus rather than on the fuzzy female person. And the following shot sharpens the emotional impact of the first. Jeanne is in the elevator, slowly being carried up past the lighted floors. We don't see Jeanne but her mirror image, trapped in one half of the frame, with the lights of the passing floors playing over her face. The slow trip becomes a poignant metaphor. The woman trapped in a small, dark space while the world's lights flicker by is an image whose real self is obscured. As Jeanne leaves the elevator, the angles of the mirror's edges fragment her image further. And Akerman uses this particular sequence of shots and the elevator itself only when Jeanne returns to her apartment, never when she leaves it.

The apartment seems to have a life of its own, to have needs and demands which manipulate Jeanne and structure her day much more substantially than do the needs of either her living son or once living husband. Both of them are, she tells a neighbor, "easy to please," blind to their surroundings or to what is on the table. (5) It is the apartment that makes clear and tangible demands. It must be cleaned, its dishes washed, its furniture polished, its rooms aired of unpleasant odors, its

voracious appetite for human attention, love and labor appeased. (6)
The cuts in the film emphasize this fact. Akerman's camera often lingers lovingly in a room moments after Jeanne has left it, or precedes her entrances by a few long feet of film which show the quiet permanence of the apartment. Older than Jeanne, it will survive her.

Much of the cutting in the film involves the physical presence of the house and its maintenance. Because there is no camera movement, there is no invisible editing and very few cuts on Jeanne's moving figure. Although Akerman occasionally moves from one room to another by cutting on the placement of Jeanne's figure within the frame, she is much more likely to cut on objects. A table in one shot is balanced by a bowl in the shot adjacent to it. By cutting on lights, sounds and objects, Akerman emphasizes the overpowering presence of the apartment that, in its very ordinary state, has such an effect on the lives of its inhabitants.

A frequent kind of cut involves a movement from one room to the next; Jeanne turns out the light in the kitchen, and turns on the light in the living room. The cut is masked by the darkness between the two moments. Similar cuts are made with doors opening and closing, often in combination with turning on and off of lights. Such cuts make the film smoother than repeated jump cuts would have, providing natural fades without compromising Akerman's static frame or the illusions of naturalism and real time. The cuts also serve to emphasize Jeanne's compulsive nature and thrift. The lights are turned off to save electricity, the doors closed to save heat. The incessant turning on and off of lights, the rhythm of the opening and closing doors, become additional rituals, visual and aural patterns that add another level of repetition to the film and emphasize its pace.

The lighting pattern in the elevator is one more example of these repeated physical motifs. A far more important one is the neon light that flashes into Jeanne's living room each evening. With its consistent, unchanging pattern (four regular flashes and a flicker) the neon light, which never goes out and is never washed out by the light sources in the room, becomes a visual metaphor for the lives of the film's characters and perhaps a foreshadowing of Jeanne's breakdown at the film's end. Hers is a "flicker" of life that is always contained by the more powerful pulsation and control of a larger pattern.

The three days of Jeanne's life are significantly different. If the first day is a usual day when everything goes smoothly, we see that the second day throws Jeanne slightly off balance. Because a client stays longer than usual, Jeanne burns the potatoes that were cooking on the stove. With her hair slightly mussed, she wanders from room to room with the pot of burned potatoes, wondering what to do with them. It is a powerful moment in the film, the first time we have ever seen her lose her composure or perform an action that is not completely efficient. Because Jeanne has no potatoes left in the house, she must go again to market. Dinner is late. And although she is quick to reassert the family routine

by forcing her son to take their nightly walk around the block, although he would prefer to read, Sylvan destroys her day further by embarrassing questions and confessions about sex. Although Jeanne heads the questions off, the day is not what it should have been.

The third day is even more disrupted. Jeanne fails to button her robe completely and gets shoe polish on her cuff while polishing Sylvan's shoes. Both precision and efficiency are eroded. She moves in and out of rooms turning their lights on and off as she goes, with no idea of what to do once in them. She arrives too early at the post office and grocery and is unable to locate a button for Sylvan's coat at the several shops she visits. She washes her dishes over and over and kneads a meatloaf interminably. When her coffee tastes strange, she throws it out and makes a new pot but finds she cannot drink even that. At the restaurant where she usually goes after shopping, her usual waitress has already gotten off, and a stranger occupies her favorite seat. It is an older, business-like woman with short hair and no makeup who smokes and is engrossed in her work. Traditional, feminine Jeanne is literally displaced by a new kind of woman. At the shops Jeanne makes an attempt to talk to the sales people about her family. Previously she had been pleasantly formal to them. She even tries for the first time to play with the baby she sits for, but it cries whenever she picks it up. She sits and stares into space. She is inactive. She responds sexually to her client and then stabs him to death with her sewing scissors.

Given the role of the housewife as Akerman presents it, one could easily define Jeanne as a "victim of society" and her act of murder an act of liberation. But there is another aspect of the film that undercuts this interpretation: the psychologically and socially repressive role of the mother in the patriarchal family. While Jeanne's relationship with her apartment marks her as a social victim, her relationship with her son shows him to be victimized as well.

Jeanne is a victim who accepts her victim's role and forces her son to join her in it. Akerman thus reveals the social role that many women have been compelled to assume. As conservative force in the family, mothers transmit patriarchal values to their children and assure through their repression and subjugation, the continuance of the dominant social order. The emergence of this role as a full-blown stereotype in male culture can be seen often in film: Leo McCarey's MY SON JOHN is certainly a prime example; the woman in THE HARDER THEY COME, a more contemporary one. Denouncing the stereotype has led many women to deny its real social base and has kept feminists from giving it the serious treatment it deserves. The pitfalls Akerman risks in her attempt to do so are obvious. She presents Jeanne's role as repressor so graphically that her character becomes a difficult one to sympathize with. By zealously defending the family and internalizing its values, Jeanne seems to renounce all opposition and to accept the principle of male-dominated bourgeois society: "bad luck is your own fault." (7)

The idea of the mother as a monster within the home is not a new one in

either film or literature, and in Dielman's interactions with her son, she exhibits the kind of character traits which Phillip Wylie grouped together and labeled "Momism" in the 1940s. (A concept which peaked in popularity as women were forced back into their homes during the 50s, Momism allowed men to blame women for all the world's ills while never noticing that it was the active *repression* of women in post-war America that produced Mom in the first place.) Jeanne is rigidly compulsive and thrifty, completely invested in concepts of order and cleanliness, with no interests outside her home and no ideas. When her son asks her why she married his father, she explains that she did not want to marry him when he was rich; but that after he lost his money, she could not be talked out of the marriage. She finds mention of her husband's body distasteful and explains sex as something to submit to in order to produce children. The marriage to a weak, poor and unattractive man indicates Jeanne's resolve to have a husband she could tower above as a beautiful and competent woman. And her relations with her son reveal her attempts to cast him in the same mold: as a weak man, without hope or thought of rebellion. As a stereotyped castrating mother, Jeanne Dielman is distinguishable from Mrs. Portnoy and Ma Jarred only by virtue of style.

Jeanne's conscious choice of her role in the victim/victimizer chain may seem at first glance to undercut Akerman's apparent intent in the film: to portray a woman who is a product of a specific class and social milieu, a woman shaped by society and by history. I believe, rather, that it reveals Akerman's sophisticated understanding of the role of women in the home, showing to what lengths some are forced to go in order to have autonomy in the only sphere allotted them. If such women seem monstrous, they become so only to defend themselves from almost overwhelming social forces. Just as Dorothy Arzner's Harriet Craig (in *CRAIG'S WIFE*) was willing to sacrifice everything, including her husband, in order to preserve the only place in the world where she had power and security, so Jeanne Dielman is similarly willing to make sacrifices to preserve her home. These include not only her physical prostitution but the renunciation of all genuine human relationships.

Jeanne's son Sylvan's character is not fully revealed, but he has clearly internalized many of the values of his mother and his culture. He corrects her lapses from proper motherhood immediately, reasserting the family routine when it threatens to break down. His only rebellion in the film is to suggest that the family walk be abandoned, but when Jeanne insists, he dutifully puts on his coat. His weakness is emphasized in his total lack of social life and in his failure to pass a school test by faking an illness.

The extent to which Sylvan has accepted Jeanne's values is illustrated by this remarkable interchange, uttered after he returns home on the second day to find dinner late:

Sylvan: "Your hair's all tousled."

Jeanne: "I let the potatoes boil too long."

That the two perfectly understand each other is one level of communication: to Sylvan, it is logical that a hitch in the day's schedule is enough to muss his mother's hair. That we know her hair is messy because she hasn't had the time to comb it after an overlong sex act adds another level. At this level, Jeanne denies not only her sexual activities but the function she performs to support the family-as prostitute and as worker.

The sexually repressive nature of the family and its links with the authoritarian personality are perfectly realized in Jeanne's character. And it is in terms of sexuality that her role as agent of repression is most fully shown. During the second evening, Sylvan attempts to talk to Jeanne about sex. In a remarkable monologue he describes his introduction to sex through a friend, who has told him, "The penis is a sword; the deeper you thrust it, the better it is." The pain and power associated with that image evokes his own secret fantasies about sex between his parents and his confusion of guilt over his father's death. Hating his father's sexual use of his mother made him wish for the father's death, but to Sylvan's cry for help and explanation and comfort, Jeanne coldly answers, "You shouldn't have worried." To end the discussion, she turns out the light.

The mother's refusal to deal with her own sexuality honestly and to recognize the sexual confusion of her children is one factor, Horkheimer argues, that contributes to the continuation of a repressive social order:

"Under the pressure of such a family situation the individual does not learn to respect his mother in her concrete existence, that is, as this particular social and sexual being. Consequently, he is not only educated to repress his socially harmful impulses (a feat of immense cultural significance) but, because this education takes the problematic form of camouflaging reality, the individual also loses for good the disposition of part of his psychic energies. Reason and joy in its exercise are restricted; the suppressed inclination towards the mother reappears as a fanciful and sentimental susceptibility to all symbols of the dark, maternal and protective powers."[\(8\)](#)

When Jeanne hides the reality of not only her past sexual life with Sylvan's father but of her present sexual life with the clients who visit her regularly, monotonously, each weekday afternoon, not only sexuality but work is repressed. Jeanne denies that she works at all and is thus able to maintain the illusion that she is "only a housewife." Her self-definition does not include the concept of work. By engaging in prostitution in her home, while the potatoes boil, Jeanne relegates it to the level of cleaning the bathtub or bleaching out a particularly nasty stain. Sex becomes a necessary but bothersome choice.

Dielman's role as a prostitute becomes another facet of her role as both repressive agent and conservative social force. The prostitute complements the wife, and both are necessary in maintaining the status

quo and preventing any real change from occurring. As a prostitute Dielman provides a socially acceptable outlet for drives which left unchecked might lead the individual to question the sexually repressive nature of society and to think of rebellion. If, as some feminists argue, the prostitute literalizes the sexual oppression of all women by calling it by its right name—an exchange of sex for money—and refuses to accept the nonnegotiable items (love, marriage, dinners) that most women bargain for, she may, in fact, avoid being a sexual victim herself. But by serving as a stabilizing force in bourgeois society, she perpetuates the sexual oppression of other women and leaves them and herself open to other forms of oppression.

The role of prostitute (a job many women have found capable of providing large amounts of money in a short time) allows Jeanne the luxury of maintaining that she is a housewife, with her dead husband's support replaced by that of the five Johns she services. They replace the father as dispensers of cash while Jeanne serves as dispenser of culture.

As Jeanne misrepresents herself to Sylvan through lies and distortions, the camera similarly represses sexuality through its selection of the moments of time it chooses to show or to omit. Although Akerman shoots much of the film in real time, the sex between Jeanne and her first two clients is not shown at all. Possibly, Akerman is seeking to avoid any audience voyeurism. Because sex is in itself often interesting, omitting it altogether from the film is one way to make it seem unimportant, to prevent any sexual titillation from creeping into the film.

This seems a glib way of solving an important problem in cinema: How does one present sexuality, given the audience's conditioned responses to it as spectacle? Hard-core pornography teaches us that it is quite possible through repetition and the objectification of body parts to make the sex act seem as boring and mundane as washing dishes, as distasteful as cleaning the toilet. But by her failure to show Jeanne's physical prostitution, Akerman calls attention to it. She makes us not voyeurs but busybodies — we wonder what went on in the bedroom. By withholding knowledge of sex, she makes us preoccupied with it and forces us to identify not with Jeanne but with Sylvan, from whom knowledge is similarly withheld.

In the chain of rituals, of monotony, of the interchangeability of days and events that the film presents, the act of sex stands as an anomaly. Although sexual parts are interchangeable in filmed pornography, men and women are not; each person makes love differently. To preserve the illusion that Jeanne's clients (and all men) are identical, the filmmaker must not show their most personal, least interchangeable acts. In a film of such realism, this flaw or distortion is particularly noticeable and unfortunate.

On another level it destroys the credibility of the film. When we finally see Jeanne in bed with a client on the film's third day, we know something significant is about to happen. When we see her react

sexually to the man, we are confused. Our lack of knowledge about her prior sexual behavior prevents us from understanding her: does she always respond, or is sexual response a further symptom of her disintegration? The film's point is muddled, and Jeanne's act incomprehensible. Does she kill the man because he made her respond despite herself or simply because she had a bad day?

While Akerman plays down the importance of the killing to the film as a whole, a look at the film's narrative structure reveals that the murder is demanded: the film has a conventional narrative structure despite its slow pacing and technical innovations. (9) It tells a story, sets up a conflict, and offers a solution to the conflict. It has a violent climax and period of reflective calm afterwards. The editing becomes faster as the climax approaches, and the revealing of new bits of information — the sexual act — piques our interest and lets us know that a solution to the conflict is near. Scissors left conveniently near the bed foreshadow the film's resolution. (10)

One can take the film's climax in at least two ways. My own reaction was to see Jeanne's act as a repressive one, a response to her sexual awakening. To accept this interpretation, one first has to believe that her breakdown is a positive thing: that a breakdown is preferable to a life of calm, controlled insanity, and that sexual response could be the first step toward that breakdown and thus toward change. The film becomes a critical one — critical of Jeanne's role as repressed and conservative force while cognizant of the difficulties of change — while Jeanne's act is part of a desperate struggle to preserve the status quo in the face of forces that are threatening to change and overwhelm her. The film, then, illustrates the power of bourgeois, patriarchal culture and points out the degree to which most of us have internalized its mandates. Ending the film with a bloody Jeanne, sitting in a dark room with neon flashing over her face and the blue and white china crock prominently in the foreground, seemed to capture in a frame the hegemony of oppressive forces, the futility of isolated, individualized revolt.

Chantal Akerman intends that the film be read differently. She has said of the murder, "It was either him or her, and I'm glad it was him." The murder is seen as an act of liberation, one which, Akerman says, "will change her life."

Such a concept of problem solving is neither particularly novel nor arguably feminist, which makes its use by women writers and filmmakers all the more distressing. It is understandable in such a work as Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe Von Trotta's *LOST HONOR OF KATHERINA BLUM*, where a young woman shoots the muckraking reporter who has tormented her throughout the film. But the reporter is an old-fashioned villain, a symbol more of a certain kind of press than of male culture, and his death is as cathartic for the audience as the climactic shooting of any Western bad guy is likely to be. Nothing feminist about it.

Nor is there anything particularly feminist in the kind of solutions many

of the heroines in contemporary women's fiction reach to their objectifications and oppression: Lois Gould's beautiful victim becomes a pseudoman in *A Sea Change* and victimizes her female lover; Susan Reis Lukas's housewife/victim breaks out of her rut by having sex with two Puerto Rican boys who try to hustle her in *Stereopticon* and finishes the job by killing herself with a shiv. Judith Rossner's Theresa is murdered by a pickup in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* at precisely the moment when she decides to change her life and stop being a victim. And in Liliane Dreyfus's *FEMMES AU SOLEIL*, the heroine's conflict over whether to leave her comfortable, if stifling and superficial bourgeois life for the love and adventure offered by a younger man is conveniently resolved when he is killed in a motorcycle accident. Death is the *deus ex machina*. As children end stories, badly written, with the words "and then she died," so many women authors and filmmakers resolve the conflicts set up in the bodies of their work.

The suicidal heroine of Dinah Brooke's *Death Games* resolves her love/hate relationship with her father by slipping into his bed after he's suffered a heart attack and performing fellatio on him until he dies. Brooke, like Akerman, portrays this act as a sign of social and sexual liberation for her heroine and, by analogy, for all women; a literal blow against patriarchal culture:

"Children scream violently, struggling, hissing with rage, daughters become avenging demons. What is required is nourishment. Love. We will fight forever. We will never give up. We will spew up your aid, your allowances, your falseness; we will struggle for what we need. We cannot be denied. Our desires are as old and powerful as the earth. They are also your desires. If you deny them you will die. ... We will all be destroyed by the hidden, silent, secret desire, never expressed. You have created such a huge world, such a stack of card houses, such false structures of governments, and bombs and money and boarding schools and ministries and hotels and banks and factories and development projects and armies to hide you, to protect you from your own desires. But do not be afraid. We will pursue you. We are your daughter, your soul. We will sneak up on you in the night and in the afternoon. We are your salvation. We will have you. We will find you out in spite of all your struggles and your power. Your power is nothing. It will scream, melt, explode in the heat of our desire, and of your own."[\(11\)](#)

Such alternatives are not attractive ones and offer little hope or encouragement to real women. It's a choice between absolute repression or living out all one's repressed desires for incest, sex and death within the framework of a total war between men and women. Dusan Makavejev's *SWEET MOVIE* expresses these options perfectly through two different women: Miss World of 1984, who is objectified and mauled throughout the film until her famous chocolate bath makes her a living symbol of the union of sexual oppression and consumerism under

capitalism; and the carefree "liberated woman," a revolutionary who acts on all her desires, including the castration of her only adult lover in a bed of sugar and the seduction and murder of little boys.

Many male filmmakers use the kill-for-freedom motif of JEANNE DIELMAN, not the least of them being Sam Peckinpah. Dustin Hoffman's rampage in STRAW DOGS is as socially "justified" as Dielman's and proves him a man capable of action as hers proves her a conscious woman. Killing is used as proof of manhood in THE MARATHON MAN, where the villains which Hoffman (again) vanquishes are hardly less odious than the somewhat gentle man Jeanne Dielman kills and are meant to stand for just as many cultural evils: anti-Semitism, fascism, blacklisting, and government immorality. And the virtue of revenge and regeneration through violence is routinely offered as a solution to the moral dilemmas posed in scores of old and new films: WALKING TALL, MACON COUNTY LINE, BUSTER AND BILLIE, DEATH WISH.

Is violence any more progressive politically when women perform it? Many women applauded when the heroine of Stephanie Rothman's VELVET VAMPIRE murdered the man who tried to rape her, after pretending to submit. But Rothman later shows us that her violence was not reserved for oppressive men alone but was generalized to include more sympathetic figures, women as well as men. Most male films about female rape victims become opportunities to depict the act of rape for the titillation of the male audience, no matter how those victims ultimately respond or revenge themselves. Margaux Hemingway's murder of her rapist in LIPSTICK was overshadowed by her lengthy rape, and Yvette Mimieux's murder of the rapist/jailer in JACKSON COUNTY JAIL—the Joanne Little case in whiteface—solves nothing: not for Mimieux's character in the film and certainly not for the women who continue to be brutalized and raped inside jails and out of them.

When we study these films, we find that most of them support the social order, offering individual solutions to complex social problems: Kill criminals rather than abolish the causes of crime; kill rapists rather than rearrange the sexual power structure that necessitates the act of rape. If there are films that criticize such solutions (as I would argue in the case of WALKING TALL) then such criticism resides in the mise-en-scene, as in many films noir. The plots are spoonfed homilies to an audience that has been taught to expect what it gets: the message that violence is the acceptable way to handle all difficulties and a "natural" reaction to injustice.

The ending of Robert Altman's IMAGES crystallizes the drawbacks of such responses to oppression. Although Susannah York kills her oppressive husband, who is probably contributing to her madness, she kills him only when she sees him as a mirror image of herself. It is her own problems which haunt her and continue to haunt her after her husband's death: her husband is gone, but the greater problem, York's own, persists. Nor does Gerald Depardieu's self-castration in Ferrari's

LAST WOMAN solve the problems of machismo and egoism, as the pathetic final offering of his severed penis to his lover suggests, though it is certainly an act that "changed his life."

If we are to make real changes in our lives and in our cinema, we must offer not only new cinematic structures but serious solutions to the social problems that persist. If none are forthcoming, I feel it is better to be descriptive than prescriptive. Films which illustrate the extent of female oppression and the tenacity of patriarchy seem to me more feminist than those which offer cheap answers to complex social, historical and political problems - answers that fall within the range of acceptable responses as defined by male-dominated bourgeois culture. The sections of JEANNE DIELMAN which examine in minute detail the function and practice of housework and the role of the traditional mother within the repressive structure of the nuclear family are among the finest examples of feminist cinema yet produced, pioneering and carefully wrought in both form and content. I only wish Akerman had been content with this magnificent and unique achievement rather than succumbing to the demands of the traditional narrative film form that requires a bang-up ending and the culture that requires a neatly packaged and thoroughly acceptable message. In this case: Killing is good for you.

Notes:

- [1.](#) Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, "The Manufacture of Housework," *Socialist Revolution*, 5:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1975), 6.
- [2.](#) Ann Oakley, *Woman's Work* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 95.
- [3.](#) Ehrenreich and English, p. 19.
- [4.](#) The static camera becomes confusing at only one point in the film: the nightly walk around the block. Four shots show them on the block's four sides, but the streets could be anywhere. Without a tracking shot, we have no sense that the four streets interlock.
- [5.](#) This proves to be delusion. When Jeanne starts to perform her role as a housewife *poorly*, her son is quick to notice, to button an open robe or tidy disarrayed hair. Her perfect performances are taken for granted, but she is never allowed to stray from the rigid bounds that circumscribe her role.
- [6.](#) The house has something of the feel that Lotte Eisner described so well in German films and literature, mirrored by a linguistic structure that gives objects a life of their own: "...they are spoken of with the same adjectives and verbs used to speak of human beings, they are endowed with the same qualities as people, they act and react in the same way... (the houses) seem to have an insidious life of their own when the autumn evening mists stagnate in the streets and veil their imperceptible grimace." See *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1969), p. 23.

[7.](#) Max Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," in *Critical Theory* (N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 121.

[8.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[9.](#) This and all references to Akerman's comments on JEANNE DIELMAN were discussed at a screening of the film at the Museum of Modern Art's CINEPROBE series, November 8, 1976.

[10.](#) If, as feminist film critic Barbara Halpern Martineau has convincingly argued in her lectures, most narrative films reflect a structure that is remarkably close to the conventional pattern of male sexual response (tension build up, climax, exhaustion), then Akerman's film falls well within this range rather than positing an alternative narrative structure that is female or feminist.

[11.](#) Dinah Brooke, *Death Games* (N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 147-148.

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Gays and film: an introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

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Everybody's just a little
bit homo sexual
whether they like it or not
Everybody feels a little bit
of love for their sex
even if they almost forgot
— Allen Ginsberg

Gay film work constantly looks in two different directions. On the one hand, it is part of and inextricably bound to the gay community and the political expression of that community, the gay liberation movement in all its diversity. Gay film work — criticism, teaching, filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition — comes out of, stands as part of, and contributes to gay liberation. On the other hand, and simultaneously, gay film work is part of film culture as a whole, even when it has been and still is forced into a closet existence. This dual nature has shaped and will continue to influence gay film activity. Because of this, a Special Section on Gays and Film is itself a political act, and that means it's worthwhile — no, more than that, necessary — to start by situating this Special Section in relation to the gay movement today and in relation to the present state of film culture.

Gays have been making films and writing about them from the beginnings of cinema. Given the conditions of oppression homosexuals have faced, it is no surprise that almost all of this activity has existed in the closet, appearing in sublimated forms, with some open expression only in the artistic avant-garde. Thus one of the key tasks in developing gay film culture today is finding and reclaiming the past, and determining with as much care as is possible this repressed history. Eisenstein, Arzner, von Sternberg, Dietrich, and many hundreds more figures demand re-examination to determine their overt and covert homosexual sensibility. But any such re-examination and reclaiming of the past can only take place today in light of the vast changes in gay consciousness following the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 when gays militantly and spontaneously demonstrated their identities and

demands en masse. Since that time we've entered a new era of open gay politics, and as a result, of open gay film criticism and film making.

"Gay and Proud," one of the spirited slogans of the gay movement, expresses this new consciousness which has been seen in the developing criticism within the gay press, such as Lee Atwell's excellent reviews in the arts and culture oriented *Gay Sunshine*, the often irrepressibly extremist reviews by various hands in the radical *Fag Rag*, and the ongoing criticism appearing in Canada's *Body Politic* and England's *Gay News* and *Gay Left*. This new era has also seen various established critics come out, such as Robin Wood. But for the most part, open gay criticism in the 70s has resided in the gay press and parts of the alternative press in North America. It hasn't been on the agenda in film studies or in the pages of film publications. That situation is changing. In England, the National Film Theatre has completed a major season on gays, and the publication by the British Film Institute of an indispensable booklet, "Gays and Film," with articles by Caroline Sheldon ("Lesbians and Film"), Richard Dyer ("Stereotyping"), and Jack Babuscio ("Camp and the Gay Sensibility"), marks the emergence of a strong gay presence in contemporary film thought. Hopefully this Special Section can establish a precedent in North America. The next step is obviously continued publication and hopefully a major retrospective and/or festival showcasing the history of gays in film, gay film people, and the work of contemporary gay filmmakers. Ideally a traveling series could emerge and be showcased around the United States and Canada.

Before going on, some clarification of terms is in order. At present in the United States there are distinct regional and political differences within the homosexual liberation movement regarding use of terms such as "gay." For many straight people the term refers to both males and females, and it is so used in parts of the movement. In some parts of the country, "gay" refers specifically to men and "lesbian" to women. Further, within the movement the terms "faggot" and "dyke" are frequently used, but because of the long history of those terms as oppressive pejoratives, they are — like the word "nigger" within the black community — not acceptable for use outside the group. Obviously the precise term is less important than the political position which informs the discussion.

Although many statements in this Special Section on "Gays and Film" apply equally to gay men and lesbians, the discussion here is written by men and refers primarily to gay men. This was a conscious decision and reflects a number of considerations. Most importantly, it reflects my concern as editor of this Special Section that the particular nature of lesbian oppression and resistance not be dealt with in a superficial way. To simply reprint or commission a lesbian article just to "balance" the issue seemed, after much thought and discussion with the other members of the editorial board, the worst sort of liberal tokenism. The double oppression of lesbians, as homosexuals and as women, makes the development of lesbian film criticism inseparable from feminist film

criticism. Clearly, while there are many similar and identical concerns in gay male and lesbian film criticism, there are also profound differences, and those must be dealt with in a direct manner. Lesbians cannot be regarded as simply a female adjunct to gay liberation: a point they have repeatedly made by separating themselves from gay males, both individually and organizationally.

(In this light it is encouraging that recently gay men and lesbians in some parts of the country have been able to work in coalition, especially around gay civil rights issues following the success of the Anita Bryant campaign against homosexuals. It should go without saying that the success of such joint work depends primarily on the ability of the men involved to work in nonsexist ways.)

Additionally, some practical concerns have shaped this decision. While JUMP CUT has already published the work of lesbian critics, submissions have been fairly rare — not surprising given the seemingly straight identification of the publication and given the left wing political orientation of JUMP CUT, which doubtless further restricts possible contributions. Furthermore, lesbian feminist criticism has an existing outlet — the lesbian and feminist press — which makes it less likely to be submitted to a film publication. There are problems for both sides even with the simple reprinting of lesbian film articles. Usually written for a specific and knowledgeable audience, they are often inappropriate for people who don't know the terms and concepts taken for granted when lesbians write for lesbians. (Or, to put it another way, such articles can't be co-opted.) The further step of soliciting articles presents additional considerations. Few radical lesbians see writing film criticism for a magazine whose readers are mostly straights as a priority activity. All of which is not to walk away from the issue. In the very process of making and discussing this Special Section, the entire JUMP CUT staff agreed that we are committed to publishing a Special Section on "Lesbians and Film" as soon as that can be accomplished, and we invite the participation of interested writers.

A further aside: even in writing this I'm painfully aware that all of this drawing of fine lines must seem absurd to some readers — a ridiculous overqualification — and to yet others an outstanding arrogance — yet another hetero male trying to get his anti-sexist credentials validated. But the nature of political work today makes it especially difficult to do justice to political reality. Contradictions are especially ripe, and the temptations of blind dogmatism and inept opportunism are powerful. But, if it is difficult for straights of both sexes and particularly men to publicly take a position on sexual politics today, it is also essential that one try to do so. No one person, group, or tendency has a franchise on political correctness at present, and ideas and positions can only be tested in open political activity. Correct ideas, as Mao reminds us, come from practice, from the actual struggling of contradictory ideas in the arena of social action. In this sense, "coming out" is not something reserved for gay men and lesbians.

In the following articles a variety of interests and approaches appear. To begin, Tom Waugh surveys three recent gay-made films within the context of the contemporary gay movement. He discusses the mixture of political and social contradictions that shape both the production and reception of gay films and in the process suggests future directions for gay filmmaking. Looking to the past at gay images in film noir, Richard Dyer pinpoints overt and covert gay male and lesbian characters and discusses the nature of repressive stereotyping in Hollywood film. For his use of gay stereotypes, West German director Rainer Fassbinder has gained considerable notoriety, and in two reviews of his film *THE FOX (FISTRIGHT OF FREEDOM)*, Bob Cant and Andrew Britton discuss and evaluate Fassbinder's gay politics. These opposed analyses suggest some of the important issues involved in developing a gay critique. Taking another director who has frequently used gay themes and characters, Will Aitken examines Bertolucci's work and argues a new interpretation of *LAST TANGO*. To conclude the section, Tom Waugh and I offer a dialogue that we hope will show some more of the issues and implications of the section.

Taken together, and read along with the BFI "Gays and Film" booklet, these articles suggest the importance of a gay critique for film criticism in general. Obviously there is the recovery of a lost history, so that we truly understand the many contributions of gays to world cinema. More important is the recognition of the repressed — the interpretation of what has remained uninterpreted, in both open and sublimated forms. A strong part of this involves the question of gay images and stereotypes in film, a discovery and recognition of the contradictions of past cinema — both in their oppressive and negative aspects and in their liberating and positive aspects. In addition, a vital area for investigation is the contribution of gay avant-garde filmmakers. While recognized by the formalist critics who dominate this area, the work of Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, and many other openly gay experimentalists has never been done justice in terms of their major gay concerns. Such a criticism would have its own latently subversive nature, for it would undermine the very premises of formalist aesthetics, just as the accurate recognition of camp sensibility, Jack Babuscio argues, undermines the "high art" premises of establishment criticism.

But the case for gay criticism rests on more than the undeniable fact that it is necessary for a complete film history and film criticism, or its implicit challenge to all varieties of reactionary criticism from formalism to homophobic psychoanalysis. For those of us committed to developing left film criticism and left filmmaking, gay male and lesbian consciousness is a necessary part of our work.

Gay men and lesbians have developed their consciousness in the shadow of the dominant patriarchal, straight, capitalist culture. As a result, their culture and their resistance has a dual aspect, both shaped by and resistant to the dominant ideology. In short, it is contradictory and simultaneously shows progressive and regressive aspects. The radical wing of the gay and lesbian movement has been active in criticizing the

negative aspects of homosexual culture and in nurturing the positive aspects, thus accelerating the movement's liberating direction. Left cultural workers have much to learn from gay culture, just as many of us have learned from critically and actively studying black culture, another culture of resistance which is an inspiration in building a revolutionary cultural front. By "learning from" I don't mean "ripping off." Rather I mean actively understanding gay male and lesbian liberation, joining with it because only then can we have a left movement and left cultural work that is in fact rich and diverse. This is more than left toleration of homosexuals, it is more than "some of my best friends are...", it is more than left lip service to lesbian and gay male demands. First, it means genuine active support of gay civil rights, which is now the main arena of political struggle for lesbians and gay men. Second is the more difficult task of joining in struggle and unity with gay leftists.

That desirable unity will only become real through struggle — struggle against homophobia and all forms of sexism within the left as well as society at large. And that struggle will commence only when leftists come out against hetero-chauvinism and privilege. From that start we can together build a film criticism and a filmmaking that gets beyond a Special Section, that incorporates lesbian and gay male politics in everything we do.

The creation of this Special Section has been an exhilarating task for me, and I've learned an immense amount in working on it... that old theory and practice dialectic. I want to thank Tom Waugh for his tireless help and loving criticism. The entire JUMP CUT staff participated in the critique and revision of various parts of the section and in working out the politics of our joint editorial. I think we all grew from it. At a critical point, Chris Riddiough helped by discussing the politics of the editorial. Richard Dyer and Will Aitken engaged our suggested criticisms in ways that taught us in turn. Our comrades at *Gay Left* readily granted reprint rights. I hope Allen Ginsberg will understand my changing two words (but keeping the meter). Finally, I'd like to thank the lesbians and gay men who have had the patience and love to teach and criticize me: this section is some of the result.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Who Are We? A Very Natural Thing The Naked Civil Servant Films by gays for gays

by Thomas Waugh

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INTRODUCTION: WILL HOMOSEXUALS BE ADMITTED TO THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY?

The prospect of writing on a few gay-oriented films for JUMP CUT has caused me a few tremors of hesitation. There are obvious dangers in blowing one's professional cover (i.e., coming out) in academia in 1977. But there are worse places to come out in than a Faculty of Fine Arts, like a Faculty of Engineering, for example (to indulge in a little of what is called interdisciplinary retaliatory stereotyping). And if a friend of mine in an English department was able, just last year, to seize tenure from the jaws of a board of Catholic priests, things are looking up indeed. There are other more important reasons for my hesitation, which I would like to outline briefly before I get started.

Dialogue between gay leftists and straight leftists is not a new phenomenon, but until recently it was never conducted equitably or constructively. As a rule, most serious leftists now give at least token support to the issue of gay civil rights, as they do to one variation or another of the feminist analysis — you just can't keep opportunism in the closet these days. Nevertheless, gays still occasionally get expelled from left party formations. The Venceremos Brigade still won't let us go to Cuba with them. An enthusiastic gay contingent gets ignored and insulted at last summer's 4th of July Coalition, Anti-Bicentennial Rally in Philadelphia. And one still has to deal with such provocations as a position paper recently published by a California-based splinter group that states unequivocally that "homosexuals cannot be communists." [\(1\)](#)

As a teacher, I occasionally run into a few other variations of this old song and dance. Two recent examples: "There won't be any homosexuals in the classless society," and a reference to the Nazi extermination of homosexuals as an "isolated atrocity."

Adherents to the robust and rapidly growing gay left movements in North America and Europe constantly run into that kind of bigotry within the Left. Ironically, this more often comes from middle-class intellectuals than from workers themselves, as the experiences of lesbians in working women's groups and of gay men and women in various unions have revealed. The attitudes of these pseudo-radicals usually boils down to, "We think you should have job security even if you are sick and leave the revolution to us." In the face of all of this, many gay radicals have simply resorted to organizing and consciousness-raising within the gay community itself. Others refuse to leave the revolution to straights. For this courageous minority, the model provided by contemporary East Germany is an important one: it can hardly be a coincidence that the most liberal of the socialist states with regard to sexual minorities is also the one in which gays participated most actively in pre-revolutionary party formations. [\(2\)](#)

To return somewhat closer to home, even a journal as progressive in its sexual politics as JUMP CUT needs to examine its own record. The most obvious blot in this record came late in 1974, when a JUMP CUT reviewer casually passed on one of the oldest and most libelous stereotypes going. [\(3\)](#) A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then, but the offending article, a discussion of the Clint Eastwood vehicle THUNDERBOLT AND LIGHTFOOT, wittily entitled "Tightass and Cocksucker," needs to be given a decent burial. One of the few critics around to have confronted the homoerotic subtext of the "buddy" genre head-on, the author, Peter Biskind, correctly points to a fabric of sly allusions and suggestive imagery beneath the surface of the film, but then he turns his perception in a direction so perverse and reductionist that it is hard to follow.

The gist of the argument is that there must be some connection between this latent gay motif and the film's much more blatant misogynist sensibility (surely a conventional feature of the genre). But the connection posited by the article is that, as everyone knows, homosexuals hate women. Behind the film, in fact, lies a conspiracy of women-hating homosexuals with the intent of denigrating heterosexuality. This seditious intent is no doubt realized by the total suppression of overt gay references, by the prurient, mocking, and exploitative tone of the gay subtext, and by the startlingly original idea of having the proto-gay character stomped to death. The film is no less anti-gay than it is anti-woman. In fact, it is anti-sex and about as subversively homoerotic as a frat party drag show or a barroom fag joke. Thanks a lot — we could pull off a better conspiracy than that anytime. (Just think of how skillfully we seduce your children.) The mind boggles over how a jumble of sly fag jokes tossed about by presumably straight filmmakers can be read as pro-gay propaganda, and furthermore how gays can then get blamed for the anti-woman attitudes that accompany them. You can't win. For me, the film is definitive proof of the intrinsic identity between homophobia and sexism.

If JUMP CUT's single such slip-up is easily atoned for, a more general

homophobia-by-default is less easy to repudiate, as well as to define. Any faggot or dyke worth his or her salt knows that silence is one of the first symptoms of advanced homophobia. And in this sense JUMP CUT is clearly suspect (although the silence of other radical film mags, from CINEASTE to SCREEN, is deafening in comparison-without even considering the latter's adherence to certain latently homophobic aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis).

JUMP CUT's most recent attempt to deal with the "buddy" movies, Arthur Nolle's "Male Companionship Movies and the Great American Cool," (4) was so anxious to block and repress a crucial aspect of the films under discussion—that is, the obvious homoerotic undertone of most of them — that it left a trail a mile wide. Except for a single passing reference, the article's avoidance of the love that dare not speak its name was as conspicuous as that of the films themselves.

It is true, however, that JUMP CUT has been inching forward in this area. I was so excited to see the two open lesbians among the contributors to last summer's special issue that I nearly stopped hating women for a moment. And the two pieces on DOG DAY AFTERNOON in the same issue at least recognized the relevance of the film to the gay problematic, although neither went beyond the call of duty.

Okay, it is in this context that I hesitate in writing this piece. Given the lingering homophobic tendency of the straight Left, does it not amount to treachery to criticize fellow gays (which I am about to do), to provide fuel for existing anti-gay stereotypes within the JUMP CUT readership, to wash the gay movement's linen in front of a possibly unsympathetic audience? Just what the movement needs!

What it really needs, I believe (as does an increasingly articulate segment), is a recognition of its stake in all revolutionary struggles and a firmer commitment to its natural alliance with radical and feminist causes. And not only this. What it also needs is dogged and determined spokespeople within the straight Left loudly refusing to down one or more ounce of shit from the closet bigots therein and defiantly insisting that any Marxist analysis or feminist analysis that ignores the gay struggle is an incomplete analysis. And they must persistently remind the Left that we are planning to turn out in full force, in our habitual percentage, for the classless society.

A VERY NATURAL THING

When Christopher Larkin's *A VERY NATURAL THING* first appeared in early 1974, the gay men's movement had every reason to be encouraged. "Serious" and "First" were the two words everyone used to describe this feature-length color narrative that dared to deal with gay male life from a gay perspective and in a non-porno framework. And it is true that its seriousness and its innovativeness both guarantee its place as a milestone in gay film history, despite its many obvious shortcomings.

There had been gay films before. After all, by the 70s the concentrated,

profitable market of young, urban gay males was a well-tested commercial reality. Everyone from the Mafioso gay-bar entrepreneurs to haberdashers had long since cashed in on this ghettoized market, and filmmakers, at first primarily pornographers, were no different. (During the early 70s the gay porno industry was well ahead of its hetero counterpart in technical and stylistic sophistication.) Even Hollywood would wake up to the economic reality of this market, which gay publications such as *The Advocate* and *After Dark* (respectively the largest open-gay and the largest closet-gay national magazines) made clear to their advertisers was composed of freeliving, big-spending young bachelors with sophisticated tastes. However, until *A VERY NATURAL THING*, the non-porno films that catered to this market seemed relics of that pre-Stonewall past that gays wanted to forget.

Two fairly competent such films had appeared in 1970, for example (the year after the New York Stonewall riots, which symbolically introduced the era of gay lib), and both reflected a gay perspective of gay subject matter. One was *THE BOYS IN THE BAND*, a quite faithful Hollywood version of a gay-authored play, slightly enervated for general consumption by director William Friedkin. The other was *STICKS AND STONES*, a more modest, independent treatment of a similar theme, directed by Stan LoPresto. Both of these films, however, embodied an anachronistic defeatism, a morbid, self-directed hatred that surely reinforced homophobia within their straight audiences, curious but still powerfully destructive artifacts of an era when "gay" translated onto the screen meant "trivial, tragic, and tormented."

What was different about *A VERY NATURAL THING* was that it deliberately attempted to escape the traditional rituals of self-loathing. Here was a film that so many of us wanted to call our own that many of us did so without thinking, not the least because of one specific feature of the film that had vast symbolic importance — its happy ending.

DIGRESSION: WHY GAY ENDINGS AREN'T ALWAYS HAPPY

The happy ending is a convention that Hollywood and its foreign competitors traditionally drop off like flies, with clockwork predictability, at the service of dramatic expediency and the sexual anxiety of the dominant culture. 1974, for example, saw, in addition to *A VERY NATURAL THING*, the successful release of Truffaut's *DAY FOR NIGHT*. Truffaut's gay audiences were momentarily transported when the film's leading man, Jean-Pierre Aumont, was revealed to be gay and to have a beautiful young lover to boot. But they should have known that it was too good to be true. Truffaut's knee-jerk liberal impulse, upon introducing such a fine affirmative image, was to have Aumont and his lover summarily wiped out by the most freakishly gratuitous highway accident in film history. Two more faggots bite the dust as Truffaut's warm, humane, joyous tribute to filmmaking tidies off its loose threads in the last reel.

As I've said, Truffaut was in traditional company. Death by unnatural causes has been the standard device used by the bourgeois cinema to

finish off any token minority member who doesn't know his or her place — blacks and sexually forward or independent women, as well as gays. Remember the dozens of gruesome deaths inflicted on poor Sidney Poitier by 50s liberalism and the hundreds of saloon prostitutes finished off so that Henry Fonda or whoever could end up with the virtuous, submissive girl from the East? The deaths reserved for lesbians and gay men have been particularly mechanical, however, and often fiendishly ingenious. If Shirley MacLaine dangling from the ceiling in *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR* and Ratso Rizzo's glazed eyeballs in the Miami bus in *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* are perhaps the images imprinted most indelibly on our collective unconscious, death by gunshot has been by far the favorite recourse of screenwriters looking for a tidy ending. Sal Mineo in *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE*, Stephane Audran in *LES BICHES*, Don Murray in *ADVISE AND CONSENT*, and Rod Steiger in *THE SERGEANT* head this list of the departed. The prizes for the most original deaths go to Mark Rydell for the tasteful way he has Sandy Dennis struck down by a falling tree in *THE FOX* and to Ken Russell for Richard Chamberlain's magnificent demise in *THE MUSIC LOVERS*, cholera-induced convulsions in a vomit-laced tub of boiling bathwater. [\(5\)](#)

Even as superficially progressive a film as *SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY* left poor Peter Finch alone with his stoic courage at the end as his handsome lover jetted off to the New World — a transatlantic flight providing a more discreet way out for 70s chic than the suicide or freak accident that would have been Finch's lot in any other era.

In any case, the flourishing gay audience of the 70s, fed up with all this gore, was bound to get its happy ending sooner or later. Larkin stepped in to fulfill the historical role of providing it for them. And happy it was!

WHY HAPPY ENDINGS AREN'T ALWAYS GAY

Larkin's conclusion to *A VERY NATURAL THING* was the fulfillment of generations of suppressed and sublimated gay male fantasy: a dazzlingly sunny, climactic beach sequence, with the film's hero and his new-found, not-quite lover running hand in hand, naked, through the surf, penises flinging about with carefully revealed spontaneity, in slow motion, of course, with swelling romantic music (tasteful brass) filling the screen, the theater, and ten million ravaged hearts.

It was a sequence that sent its original audiences out into the dark homophobic world with a euphoric, utopian energy, those sunny, slow motion shots undoing generations of bullets and falling trees (the sequence also provides the standard publicity still used by the distributor). The ending left California critic Lee Atwell equally elated, and he closed what was probably the most intelligent review of the film (reserved but encouraging) with Larkin's own description of the slow motion coda: "expansive with pure joy, playful, free, intimate, passionate—symbolizing the effort of every person who seeks a life informed by beauty, intelligence and love." [\(6\)](#)

If the sequence did in fact capture the mood of a whole generation of gay men who had discovered the freedom and beauty of their own bodies, each other, and the world outside the closet door, it is also true that the pure joy, etc. on the beach had very little to do with the anxious, reflective tone of the rest of the film, and in fact it blocked some of the insights that Larkin was groping for but never managed to articulate fully.

The story follows a year or so in the life of a young New York schoolteacher who has his fantasies of monogamous felicity rudely shattered in the first half of the film by a doomed relationship with a straight-identified young businessman. In the second half, the hero meets Mr. Right but this time manages to keep his cool and resolves to play it by ear. Mr. Right is of course the other frolicker in the surf.

The story builds, then, on a recognition of the inadequacy of traditional romantic patterns for gay lifestyles. The first relationship is destroyed by possessiveness and inflexible expectations based on received heterosexual models. But this recognition, which even the film's gratingly earnest hero, David, seems on the verge of articulating, is ultimately undercut by the sun, the sand, and the pair of gleaming asses in the waves.

This pattern of conflicting loyalties is pure Hollywood: give literal surface allegiance to the correct ideological formation (matrimony and family in the case of classical Hollywood and gay lib's ideal of non-stereotyped sexual roles in Larkin's case), but devote all your visual and dramatic energies to the values you really feel deep down (in Hollywood's case, the strictly non-domestic eroticism that props up the box office and, in Larkin's, the conventional hetero romantic fantasies). Larkin is certainly aware of the limitations of David's pathetic Hollywood-derived expectations — he forces Lover Number One to say "I love you" and to roll through the autumn leaves with David — but Larkin can no more get his sights on an alternative to the old model than can David. Larkin is confined by the very problematic he seeks to resolve. Having dutifully said "no" in the script, Larkin indulges in his slow motion coda, which drowns out that "no" with every fleck of surf and overdetermined flash of crotch.

The final sequence points to other serious limitations in Larkin's insight as well. The beach, naturally, is deliriously empty for Larkin's farewell image. The endless vista of sand and sea could be part of a Bahamas travel ad if both figures had bathing suits on, one being a bikini. Now I do not mean to be too hard on a sequence that moved me no less than it did many others in the original audience and fulfilled a specific historical function in 1974, but the emptiness of it all has disturbing implications. It is as if the two naked figures were gamboling in some pre-social paradise, like the plaintive fantasy of Blake's young chimney sweeps, (7) and such an image unfortunately expresses the social perspective of all too many gay ideologists. It is the ultimate delusive myth of a certain middle-class core of the gay community that sexual

liberation can take place without reference to its societal context. Homophobia is just one facet of a totality of sexist and class oppression. Liberation would be no problem if we all had our private beach to play on.

It is no accident that the deserted beach is also a stock image from the pages of *The Advocate*, the California-based biweekly organ of the non-politicized gay community. Here we find the consumerized, middle-class cooptation of the gay movement expressed in its most blatant terms. *The Advocate's* millionaire publisher, David Goodstein, the General Pinochet of gay lib, delivers regular polemics against the unrespectable, "unkempt" troublemakers (i.e., radicals) in the movement who hog the limelight and threaten his projected image of the respectable, winter-in-Hawaii, middle-class gay. Much of his space is devoted to features on closeted and straight showbiz celebrities, who all assure their interviewers that some of their best friends are gay. There is even an investment counseling column.

To be sure, Larkin is to be credited with showing slightly more awareness of social realities than *The Advocate*. He does show all three main characters, for instance, in their occupational milieus (although Goodstein would approve heartily of each one): the hero teaching poetry to a class of girls, Lover Number One carrying his attaché case to and from his office and ordering a female secretary around therein (I couldn't tell whether this potentially provocative insight was intentional on Larkin's part), and Mr. Right, a self-employed photographer, wielding his camera with all the artistic sensitivity to be expected of a gay man. Regrettably, this is as far as it goes. Although, for example, we learn that David cannot come out because of his teaching job, the movie communicates little sense of the dynamics of this oppression — perhaps the most palpable for gays of David's class and profession — and the way it confines him and his businessman lover to their schizophrenic lives and their isolated, fearful ghetto. And, of course, there is little sense as well that most New York gays do not have smart West Side apartments, cozy fireside dinners *à deux*, Deutsche Gramophone records, and Fire Island summers, with no persecution from landlords, police, thugs, and Salem ads. The New York of the film is that clichéd paradise for lovers from the pages of *The Advocate* and *After Dark*, revolving around Central Park, the West Village, Lincoln Center, and Fire Island, a fantasy as sanitized and phony as any Hollywood set in spite of Larkin's skilled use of location shooting and an unknown cast. It goes without saying that there is no sense whatsoever of the affinity between gays and other oppressed groups such as is felt in the work of some European gays, like Fassbinder and Pasolini, and even in that of Americans such as the Warhol-Morrissey and John Waters-Divine duos.

One or two scenes built on David's interactions with his equally ghettoized friends have satiric, even critical potential, which Larkin seems to be aware of without being able to exploit fully. In one dinner party sequence, for example, the camera repeatedly catches the host's gleaming silver services and seems equally drawn to one of the guests'

working-class Puerto Rican lover, silent and painfully out of place. This scene suggests a potential analysis of class structures within the gay ghetto à la Fassbinder, but this potential is never fully realized.

One of Larkin's most intelligent choices was to intercut his story with some documentary footage and interviews taken during the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade. In one sense this choice compensates partly for the empty societal backdrop in the rest of the picture. The images of real lesbians and gay men being themselves and talking to the camera are lively and refreshing (the interviews provide the film's keynote and title in one lesbian's comment that gayness is "a very natural thing"). But even here, the atmosphere has a somewhat overstated, euphoric edge to it and the title a strained, idealist ring as well. Seeing the film now, in retrospect, one can too easily find the lurking implication that it is no less easy to talk of liberation and natural things when surrounded by one's gay sisters and brothers in a collective demonstration than it is to frolic slow motion on a deserted beach.

In 1974, however, it seemed certain that Larkin's was a voice to be heard from in the future. Despite the awkwardness and ideological naiveté of his first effort, it seemed possible that he was on the verge of asking important questions. A VERY NATURAL THING itself still appears from time to time: it played in Montreal for a few weeks last summer in ironic juxtaposition to the mass arrests of gays being carried out at the same time by officials who apparently considered gayness A Very Dirty Thing to be swept under the carpet for the Olympics. Meanwhile, Larkin has apparently no plans for a follow-up film. Reportedly disillusioned and bitter about his first bout behind the camera, he has recently produced a commercially successful gay musical, BOY MEETS BOY, which has run in several of the major gay ghettos. Another product for *The Advocate* market, BOY MEETS BOY is a gay updating of 30s musicals conventions, consummated presumably with yet another happy ending.

WHO ARE WE?

It seems as if North American gay men will have to look elsewhere for a serious expression of their reality, filmic or otherwise. One possible direction in which to look, incredible as it may seem, is the television screen. I'm not referring to the much touted presence of a few token gays in network sitcoms last fall.⁽⁸⁾ It would be unrealistic to expect more from such tokenism than blacks got from *Julia*. After all, the portrayal of Walt Whitman in the PBS special last winter was so innocuous and whitewashed that the uninitiated audience no doubt concluded that the great gay poet was persecuted for his long hair and that the harmless-looking young man he picked up in a taxi and lived with for 20 years but never touched let alone kissed was his roommate. (The only person Wald did touch in the whole hour of histrionics and verbosity was his retarded brother.) So even if *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* does go one step beyond this, it's still not enough.

The question of whether establishment TV can go far enough (in case

anyone is still wondering) will no doubt be answered more definitively when *Who Are We?*, a documentary by and about lesbians and gay men, is finally finished and broadcast on public television sometime in the (ambiguous) future.

In the works for almost four years, the project was initiated by a West Coast documentarist, Peter Adair, whose major previous credit is a documentary on a snake-handling protestant sect that made a modest impression a decade ago. The subject matter this time is somewhat closer to home. Otherwise the film has been a collective endeavor, and now working on the final stages of the film are Adair's sister Nancy, Andrew Brown, Rob Epstein, Veronica Selber, and Lucy Phenix (who was associated with the prestigious radical documentary *WINTER SOLDIERS*).

The collective's 50-50 composition of women and men reflects their determination to redress the invisibility of lesbians in the public image of the gay movement (item: *A VERY NATURAL THING*'s only important female part was Mr. Right's heterosexual ex-wife). More generally, the aim of *Who Are We?* is simply to answer that basic question posed by the title.

This answer has proven to be more elusive, however, than the group at first expected. In fact, the impossibility of the project may prove to be the film's undoing. Consider the sheer ludicrousness of the job of defining filmically a community of twenty million lesbians and gay men that not even social scientists have been able to define to anyone's satisfaction (not that straight social scientists are particularly interested. As with *A VERY NATURAL THING*, the film's ultimate importance may be as a symbolic milestone rather than for any intrinsic aesthetic or political virtue.

Simply the very fact of being confronted with a gallery of cinema verité portraits of real, actual people, lesbians and gay men, rather than the fantasies and dramatic pretexts of sitcoms, the soap operas, and the skin flicks — real people describing real situations and experiences to the camera — this fact alone will be an important breakthrough for a minority that has never controlled its own image before.

The conception of the film has been in a constant state of flux since the outset. For one thing, the number of subjects to be presented has risen steadily as the collective has attempted to represent more and more elements within the gay community. When I encountered some of them last summer, they were in search of an East-Coast Third-World Young Male and were collecting video tests of an East-Coast White Student Activist and an East-Coast Lesbian Activist, among others.

Fault will inevitably be found with the spectrum of subjects finally chosen by the group. It will be impossible to please everyone, or maybe even anyone. The criticism they had encountered so far in the course of trial projections came from every direction. Too many monogamous couples (shades of *A VERY NATURAL THING*). Not enough

"effeminate" men. Too many "effeminate" men. What about drag queens?

One of the interviewees, a lesbian around 30, tells of her bitter memories of institutionalization as a teenager and then conducts the camera around her wilderness retreat as she chops down trees, in flannel shirt, jeans, and boots. Is that woman a negative stereotype (escapist and alienated) or a positive one (resourceful and independent), or simply a real person with an important historical testimony to offer?

If 20 subjects are necessary to suggest the diversity of the gay community, will the resulting portraits be too sketchy and superficial? The baffling range of reactions to the work in progress no doubt reflects the range of presuppositions about what the finished film should try to do. Would it be most valuable if aimed at straights? at open gays? at closet gays? The emphasis was at first to find positive role models for the gay audience on either side of the closet door, but the possibly conflicting tendency to reflect a legitimate cross-section of the gay community seems to be present, also. Naturally, there are radically opposing views on what constitutes a positive role model and what constitutes a legitimate cross-section depending on whether you read *The Advocate* or not.

One strategy of the collective that seems fairly definite and that many radical gays have found dismaying is the soft-pedaling of explicit political rhetoric and analysis in the interviews — in short, according to some critics — censorship.

Adair believes that such rhetoric will alienate non-politicized gays and prevent them from coming out and that a film like *HEARTS AND MINDS*, with its explicit political viewpoint, talks down to its audience from a position of righteousness. Even if this approach may ultimately be the only realistic way to get on the air, such logic is not likely to placate the radical critics of the project, who see the systematic suppression of political aspects of the subjects' lives as a vicious betrayal. They point to the case of a well-known activist lawyer from San Francisco who was presented in the trial version of the film without the slightest mention of his political life.

Yet when I saw that version along with a small New York audience that included several of that city's most respected gay radicals as well as a larger number of prospective small investors and other gays, the tears flowed abundantly, and there could be no questions of the compelling power of the document on its way to completion.

Whatever may be the situation by the time the collective arrives at a release version (their response to feedback seemed so conscientious that the final shape of the project is hard to predict), it is likely that any radical content will arise from an extension of the film's documentary ontology itself, rather than in the views articulated by any of the subjects or the exemplary nature of their lives as seen on the screen. I mean this in the same way that the early feminist films, modest records of ordinary

women talking about their lives, proved invaluable as a consciousness-raising tool in the women's movement, regardless of the level of awareness reached by the subjects on the screen. If the lively debate triggered by the trial version is matched on a larger scale when *Who Are We?* is finally broadcast, the collective and the radical gay community will have no cause to complain.

If, on the other hand, radical gays want films directly answering our needs as organizing tools and the needs of the gay community as a whole, films incorporating radical discourse and offering clear-sighted analysis, it is hardly news that we cannot expect these films from the establishment media but must look to alternative media resources instead, the way the feminists and the straight left have been learning to do for some time.

THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT

Another television film produced recently, in England this time, *THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT*, also appears as a model, encouraging in many respects, of the best that we can expect from the establishment media. A Thames Television International production directed by Jack Gold, *THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT* is a three-part dramatization of the autobiography of one Quentin Crisp, a British gay in his 70s who, since the film came out last year, has become something of a cult figure for the British movement.

Crisp is a "Queen," as straight reviewers trying to throw around a little gay vernacular without ever ringing true would say [\(9\)](#) (or "graceful," as Olympic sportscasters say of certain male figure skaters) — in effect, defiantly and flamboyantly "effeminate." As we see him in a brief introductory appearance at the start of the film, delicately poisoning his teacup for the camera, and as the record of his 50-year struggle demonstrates fully, Crisp is in every way worthy of the regal connotation of the term "queen" as well as the vernacular one. In fact, Crisp's story serves as much as an exemplary history of resistance to societal oppression over the years as it does as a personal memoir.

Crisp, as enacted by John Hurt, with his widely fluffed and henna-ed hair and his Cowardly intonation, comes across somewhat like Maggie Smith. Both *Body Politic* and *Gay Left*, the Canadian and British journals of radical gay lib, respectively, expressed reservations about the ultimate effect the Crisp image would have in confirming existing stereotypes among the straight and closet gay public [\(10\)](#) (surprisingly, since it is more typical of *The Advocate* to be concerned about being butch in public. I think however that any potential damaging effect is fully offset by the film's defiant embrace of the "queen" stereotype and its success in fleshing out that stereotype dramatically and historically. It is no mean accomplishment for Gold and Hurt to have realized a popular dramatic work in which an "effeminate" man, the traditional outcast of the more respectable elements of the gay community as well as of the outside world, should enlist such a strong identification from a general audience, as the Crisp character seems to do, without any of the

usual shortcuts of sentimentality, condescension, or martyr-olatry.

THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT is remarkably tough-headed. It manages to avoid a feeling of the bland, affirmative image making that gay media critics often seem to be demanding and of which A VERY NATURAL THING is the ultimate expression. It does this by retaining the personal specificity of Crisp's story and exploiting the sharp sense of self-awareness that apparently marked the original memoirs. Furthermore, the script, using a first-person voice-over narrative and pointedly ironic intertitles, has effected a layer of analytic counterpoint above the story itself, commenting at one point, for example, on the self-destructive, exhibitionist urges that seem to motivate Crisp's struggle as much as any more conventional heroic impulse.

As I've said, the film has considerable value as a historical document, a record of an aspect of contemporary history that I daresay straight people (and many young gays) know very little about: the ubiquitous, systematic homophobia of traditional bourgeois society. Once the young Crisp leaves the oppressively middleclass parental home (typical breakfast-time ice-breaker: "Are you going to get a job today?"), his picaresque journey takes him a lot of places. There are various entries into the job market, where he briefly occupies a few of those artistic positions available to discreet members of his caste. He tries his hand as a commercial artist and a tap-dancing teacher, for example. Although his adventures take place at every level of the social ladder, he invariably returns to one of the two ghettos that pre-Stonewall society permitted the uncloseted gay, the lumpen underworld and the upper-class salon circuit of the bohemian-chic intelligentsia.

Along the way, Crisp runs into every kind of persecution offered to the discriminating gay (most of which is still available) by punks, queer-bashers, police, judges, psychiatrists, clergymen, landlords, neighbors, soldiers, psychopaths, liberals, and the upper-class gay who coldly exclude such a tactless brother from their club. Crisp defies one and all to do their worst. He stubbornly refuses through all of it to surrender his chosen identity and lifestyle. His ultimate survival — and triumph, even, as "one of the stately old homos of Britain" — is a happy ending that, in contrast to Larkin's romp through the surf, resounds with inspiration, integrity, and realism.

Humor is one important way by which THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT is able to sharpen its analysis of the social and psychological dynamics confronted by Crisp. The film is wonderfully funny. It is paradoxical, and no doubt significant, that A VERY NATURAL THING and many other gay films make virtually no use of this formidable device. I say "paradoxical" because humor has always been the gay resource par excellence—virtually the only refuge and weapon we had during those eons in the closet. I would even venture to say that it often had the same kind of liberating function in the pre-Stonewall gay community that music and Christianity are said to have for blacks under slavery (and as likely to interiorize society's hatred and serve the oppressor by virtue of

its sublimating function). Both *BOYS IN THE BAND* and *STICKS AND STONES*, as rooted as they are in pre-liberation ideology, have delightful comic moments. Even if the comic predisposition has resulted in the addition of "bitchery" and "camp" to the faggot stereotype, I think it has often served us well. This makes it all the more amazing to me that, of the ten or so major gay filmmakers I could list, most are unredeemably solemn. The belly laughs are few and far between, for example, in the films of Eisenstein, Murnau, Cocteau, Visconti, Pasolini, and Fassbinder. Apart from the somewhat special case of Laurel and Hardy, and without considering the latter-day lumpen-camp genre of Warhol-Morrissey and Waters-Divine, Lindsay Anderson is the only significant exception whom I can think of.

But to return to Quentin Crisp, the irreverent wit with which he assails every target within the bourgeois order is devastating. As examples, the portrait of the army psychiatrist who crumbles before the task of deciding whether this effete young man in his underwear and nail polish is competent to serve King and Country, or Crisp's version of London gays' patriotic contribution to the war effort in the form of recreational facilities for the GIs ("Never in the history of sex was so much offered to so many by so few"). When it comes to the protagonist's own internalized oppression, the narrator is no less keen. Crisp's persistent fantasy of "the great dark man whose love I will win" is continuously played within the intertitles until finally he wakes up to the delusion of this fantasy, and the viewer is assaulted with the title to end all titles: "There is no great dark man." Class structures within the gay community, the economic bases of ghetto, closet, and homophobia, and the political function of psychiatry are all treated with the same clarity and dispatch.

Crisp's chronicle is a history, as I've said, that must be kept alive. No bourgeois historians are going to bother with it, any more than they bother noting our "isolated atrocity" at the hands of the Nazis. But at the same time, this history needs to be made complete by the qualification that Crisp is likely an exception — many of his contemporaries not gifted with the resources of his courage, tenacity, social connections, sense of humor, and luck, no doubt have succumbed to the bleak terrors of prison, asylum closet, ghetto, and repression. Homophobia is not a gratuitous quirk of bourgeois society but an integral link in a chain of sexism and economic exploitation. The ultimate victory cannot be won outside of society, or despite it, as Crisp's was, but *through* it by changing it. This is a lesson *THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT* stops short of articulating, for all its merits.

But this analysis will never be found on establishment television. We will only see it on the screen when we ourselves control our own distribution and exhibition systems, as well as the camera triggers that gay activists are using more and more in the eighth year of the Stonewall era. In any case, now that we have our happy endings, this next step has been pointed to all the more clearly.

Notes:

[1.](#) "Position Paper of the 'Revolutionary Union' on Homosexuality and Gay Liberation," reprinted in *Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question*, a pamphlet published by the Los Angeles Research Group, P.O. Box 1362, Cudahy, CA 90201. Also included in this piece of hate literature are the insights that "because homosexuality is rooted in individualism it is a feature of petty bourgeois ideology which puts forth the idea that there are individual solutions to social problems," and that gay liberation "can lead us only down the road of demoralization and defeat."

[2.](#) See Jim Steakley, "Gays Under Socialism: Male Homosexuality in the German Democratic Republic," in *The Body Politic* (Toronto), No. 29, December 1976-January 1977.

[3.](#) Peter Biskind, "[Tightass and Cocksucker](#)," [JUMP CUT #4](#), Nov.-Dec. 1974. Biskind is a personal friend of mine, and I can vouch that he has come a long way since 1974, has agreed to serve as whipping boy in this article, and has been invaluable in keeping me in touch with my latent heterophobia over the years.

[4.](#) Arthur Noletti, Jr., "[Male Companionship Movies and the Great American Cool](#)," [JUMP CUT #12/13](#), Dec. 1976.

[5.](#) For a more complete sense of this macabre tradition, see "Those Were the Gays," *Gay News* (London) #101, August-September 1976, an unsigned compilation of over 250 gay roles in the commercial cinema since 1960, with a capsule summary of each one, which reads like a list of the fallen at a veterans' memorial service.

[6.](#) Lee Atwell, "A VERY NATURAL THING," *Gay Sunshine, A Journal of Gay Liberation* (San Francisco) #23, Nov.-Dec. 1974.

[7.](#)

"And by came an Angel who had a bright key, And he open'd the coffins and set them all free; Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run, And wash in a river, and shine in the Sun. Then naked and white, all their bags left behind, They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind..." (Blake, *The Songs of Innocence*, "The Chimney Sweeper").

[8.](#) Bill Barbanes, television reviewer for *The Body Politic*, summarized his response to the new gay presence on TV in this way (# 28, November 1976):

"If a trend toward honest depiction of gay people isn't in the near future, we get back to the question of gay exposure on television. Do we want it? I think so. It boils down to this: the price we pay for a little elbow room on the tube is a lot of limp-wristed jokes. At this point, the jokes can't hurt that

much and, by sheer mathematical odds, a show will occasionally happen that portrays homosexuality sympathetically and, who knows, as a healthy alternative..."

[9.](#) For a glaring example of the misuse of the gay vernacular see Ruth McCormick, "Fox and His Friends," in *Cineaste*, 7:2, Spring 1976.

[10.](#) *The Body Politic* (#27, October 1976) wondered whether THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT was not open to "serious misinterpretation" in its review by Robert Trow:

"There are enough stereotypical notions of the gay experience in this film that would allow it to be viewed in much the same manner as BOYS IN THE BAND. For example, the film dwells just enough on Crisp's loneliness and inability to find a stable relationship that these two clichés can and will be trotted out once again as part of the "sad truth" of gay life. Similarly, Crisp's exhibitionism and flamboyant appearance will be seen as the perverse defiance of an unstable mind, rather than a gay man's courageous assertion of his right to lead his own lifestyle. Like BOYS IN THE BAND, this picture invites a response of compassion and pity from the liberal consciousness, while it tacitly reasserts the superiority of heterosexual life."

Homosexuality and Film Noir

by Richard Dyer

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Some of the first widely available images of homosexuality in our time were those provided by the American film noir. Given the dearth of alternative images, it is reasonable to suppose that these had an important influence on both public ideas about homosexuality and damagingly gay self-images. I know that as I grew up realizing I was gay, I used to identify with characters like Waldo in *LAURA* or Jo in *A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE*; they concretized and reinforced for me the negative feelings about myself that I'd picked up elsewhere in the culture. I know from work within the gay movement how widespread these images still are among gays and non-gays alike. It is important then to understand these images as one aspect of the armory of gay oppression and indeed of sexual oppression generally. How gays are represented is always part and parcel of the sexual ideology (1) of a culture and, as I hope my examination of film noir shows, indicates the complex, ambiguous ways in which heterosexual women and men are thought and felt about in that culture.

These images are found way beyond the film noir proper, in the thriller in general and in the representation of gays in all kinds of films. *THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE*, for instance, in the theater a comedy, became heavily noir in the film version, especially in the final seduction scene. And even films trying to be liberal towards gays, such as *ADVISE AND CONSENT* or *THE DETECTIVE*, when searching for a mode of representing gays and the gay life style end up by drawing largely on the mode set by film noir.

To understand what these images mean, we have to look at their formation within the film noir, which constitutes their most determinant context. Although much of the imagery can be traced back to elements outside film noir in literature and certain reaches of the gay subculture, it acquired its crucial meaning from the way it was inflected in the film noir — the role of gays in the films' plot structures, their association with aspects of the films' "world," and their characteristically noir filmic treatment. The form this article takes then is first an attempt to define and delineate the film noir, followed by a discussion of the role

of gayness within it.

WHAT IS FILM NOIR?

There is quite a lot of disagreement about film noir, both over what kind of phenomenon it is (a genre? a mood? a style? a cycle?) and over what films are to be included in it. Paul Schrader's desire in his useful article to term it a "mood" is understandable, thereby emphasizing its affective quality and acknowledging how much "looser" it is as a film kind than the Western, the gangster thriller or the backstage musical. (2) Yet if its characteristic mood or feel" is what is most important about it, this is nonetheless a highly specific quality and not just some generalized pessimism or *Angst* which one can find in an enormous range of films. Moreover, a mood is not something that is poured over a film or injected into it but is carried by identifiable aesthetic features. It seems to me that there are such features at the levels of *structure*, *iconography* and *visual style* that recur from film noir to film noir and thereby identify it as a discrete film kind, and that just such an observable continuity in a batch of films is what makes that batch a genre.

What does make film noir different from most other film genres is its history. As a continuous run of films, it lasted only from 1941 (THE MALTESE FALCON) to 1955 (KISS ME DEADLY). Elements of its generic features can of course be traced back to earlier films or film types (e.g., Warner Brothers' gangster films, German expressionism, French poetic realism, etc.), but it is the specific conjunction of all the aesthetic features that characterizes the genre as a genre. After 1955 there have been films that have worked within the noir conventions — stragglers like A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE, reworkings like P.J. (British title: A NEW FACE IN HELL) and GUNN, self-conscious nostalgia/parody films like CHINATOWN, THE LONG GOODBYE and FAREWELL MY LOVELY. I have included the later films in my discussion of the role of gayness in film noir, partly because they make explicit what had to be implicit or marginal in the earlier films. However, in this section I have restricted discussion to the main period, since exactly what counts from later periods is controversial. (I have, in fact, tested all the later examples referred to subsequently against the model derived from the main period, but you'll have to take my word for it that they do fit; it took up too much space to lay out all the evidence here).

Let me now suggest the generic aesthetic features of film noir in terms of structure, iconography and visual style.

STRUCTURE

The basic structure of film noir is like a labyrinth with the hero as the thread running through it. He starts out on a quest — to solve a mystery (Spade, Marlowe, Dana Andrews in LAURA, Bogart in DEAD RECKONING) or else to find work (DETOUR), settle down (KISS OF DEATH), commit murder (THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE, DOUBLE INDEMNITY), become a great boxer (BODY AND SOUL). Yet

the road that he chooses, or is chosen for him, does not lead directly.

Think of the standard detective story of Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie in which every incident contributes to the hero detectives understanding of the crime and is used in the final scene to demonstrate the guilty party (cf. Finney/Poirot in *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*). This is quite different from film noir. Here, whole episodes that seem to be furthering the quest turn out to have been a waste of time and energy. For instance, in *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* (1951), Guy is going to tell Bruno's father what a psychopathic son he's got, down corridors, up stairs, past dog, dead of night — only to find himself talking to Bruno. Or, in *FAREWELL MY LOVELY* (1945), what appears to be an unconnected path (Moose's search for Wanda) turns out to be a key to the mystery, while Spades visit to Jules Amthor, where he is drugged, has to fight his way through cobwebs in front of his eyes, and then through the doors and corridors of the house, tells him very little (and takes up a lot of screen time). The detour may in fact take him away from the quest altogether; most notably in *DETOUR*, Al is so far deflected from his trek across America in search of work that he never gets back to it. And of course sometimes the whole film can be seen to have been a pointless quest, as is the case with *THE MALTESE FALCON*.

The labyrinth can come out as repetition with the hero going over the same ground several times. For instance, in *FEAR IN THE NIGHT* (1947), the murder is repeated as waking dream, uncanny recall and under fake (or is it?) hypnosis; or *POSTMAN* (1945), is entirely structured around a series of repetitions (two attempts to run away, two attempts to kill Nick, two trials for murder, the echo by the lake, the title) as well as characterized by characters' endlessly returning to the same place (no matter how often they leave the place, Cora and Frank are forced to come back to the cafe).

The labyrinth is sometimes reflected in the geography of individual incidents — as in *NIAGARA* (1953), with the complex of walkways and stairs at the foot of the falls, and later around the clock tower as Monroe tries to flee Cotton; the mirror maze in *FEAR IN THE NIGHT* and *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI*; or the nightclub in *GILDA*, where mirrors turn out to be doors, and walls turn out to be windows.

The menace of the labyrinth is often heightened by the film's failure to fulfill two of the dominant expectations we have of film stories — that mysteries will be solved and that the heterosexual couple will get it together. It is not that mysteries go entirely unsolved, but the presentation often makes it feel as if they do. The detective's explanation à la Holmes or Poirot is often so breathless as to be incomprehensible, as in *FAREWELL MY LOVELY* and *THE BIG SLEEP*. Ambiguity often lingers over the complicity of a central figure, as with Dix in *IN A LONELY PLACE* (1950) and the many femmes fatales of the form. In the case of *KISS ME DEADLY* (1955), we don't really know what the explosion is that Hammer's opening the box unleashes. Is it a bomb? It's

not really big enough for the A-bomb. Hammer's involvement with the box comes through women. Is it perhaps mythically, misogynistically, Pandora's box? That would perhaps be a satisfactory metaphorical end to the film but hardly a material solution to the mystery.

The settling down of the heterosexual couple is often denied us. Spade sends Brigit to the chair in *THE MALTESE FALCON* (1941); Laurel refuses Dix even though she knows he's technically innocent in *IN A LONELY PLACE*; Phyllis and Walter shoot each other in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (1944). The separation or destruction of a couple early on in the film may be final, as in *THE BIG HEAT* and *DETOUR*. Alternatively, the heterosexual resolution often appears to be the required ending tacked on to couplings that would seem recipes for marital disaster, especially those between Johnny and Gilda, McPherson and Laura.

Further noir feeling is induced by the use of flashback, voice-over and dream structures. These may have two effects. First, they may cast into doubt the status-as-truth of the events presented. Much of the power of the cinema resides in the belief in seeing-as-believing. Although easily exposed as fraudulent theoretically, the realism/naturalism of the cinema is best not ignored as an -ism holding considerable sway over how we see films in the ordinary way of things. Because of it, until film noir the flashback was generally treated as simply the truth, no matter how introduced (as memory, confession, verbal explanation, etc.) When in the modern story in *INTOLERANCE*, in the trial scene, Robert Harron tells the court that he gave the murder weapon back to the gang boss before the murder was committed, the film presents this as a very brief flashback. Here there is no question of treating this testimony as evidence in the way a jury should, sifting it for lies or the distortions of memory. Rather the film assures us that this is what happened.

However, with film noir, where flashback is often extensively used, uncertainties begin to creep in. There are discontinuities between overlapping versions shown in flashback of what happened in *CROSSFIRE* (1947); dreams are presented with the logic of reality in *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW* (1944), or turn out to have been reality (*FEAR IN THE NIGHT*); while realities are presented with the strangeness (Gloria Grahame and ménage in *CROSSFIRE*) or the erotic intensity (*OUT OF THE PAST*, 1947) of a dream. Moreover, the highly emotional context of the telling may cast doubt on the reliability of the version of the story told. Thus we have a confession during a thunderstorm in *DEAD RECKONING* (1947), or a wounded man careening through streets in a car and then pouring it all out into a recorder in *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*. There is by no means a wholesale reversal of the Griffith-style flashback convention in film noir, but it does mark a partial departure from it which, in the context of the certainty over pictorial truthfulness prevalent in Hollywood, feels disconcerting.

Flashbacks, voices-over and dream structures may be the means of

suggesting that the progress through the labyrinth is the working out of a fated or fatal pattern. The end is known to the voice-over from the beginning even if not always to us, and all the events can be seen as leading inevitably, inexorably and gratuitously to that end. The voice-over may spell this out, as in *DETOUR* (1945), or it may simply imply it by picking on the significant moments that pointed downhill (*POSTMAN*). The nature of fate is sometimes explicitly examined in film noir, usually in the form of a character with uncontrollable ("Freudian") impulses within him/her, as in *IN A LONELY PLACE*, *LADY OF DECEIT*, *STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR* and *ON DANGEROUS GROUND*. But these are films without flashbacks or voices-over, and they make fatality to a degree comprehensible even if leaving it frighteningly uncontrollable. The flashback, on the other hand, is both vaguer as to the nature of destiny and fate and is more frightening. It gives the aesthetic structure of predestination without any ontological backup to make it comprehensible.

ICONOGRAPHY

The concept "iconography," drawn from the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky, (3) has proved particularly generative for work on film genre, as for instance in Ed Buscombe's "The Idea of Genre" (on the Western) and Cohn McArthur's *Underworld USA*. (4) It may be defined as the study of the set of images (objects, people, settings), sounds and music shared by a run of films that marks them off as a genre. Icons are the cues that immediately indicate to us, "This is a Western/science fiction/kung fu/etc. film." In the case of the Western or the gangster film, this iconographic set is very tight, precise and restricted, but there is nothing like that for film noir. However, if we use iconography in a slightly broader sense to refer to *types* of setting and star, there are some characteristic features.

SETTINGS. These are at the two extremes of the city and the rural desert. In the former, film noir takes over many of the meanings associated with city iconography in the gangster film, as evoked by Robert Warshow and Colin McArthur(5) — desolation, brutality, threat, and alienation as caught in images of pavements glistening with rain, ill-lit streets, dingy bars and grubby rooming-houses. An important noir inflection of this set of images is the increased importance of the luxurious mansions and night clubs. In the gangster film, these symbolize the pinnacle of the protagonist's rise to temporary power, but in film noir, they become the permanent environment of the hero's employers (not only those of the private eyes but also of employers in, for instance, *GILDA*, *OUT OF THE PAST*, and *SUNSET BOULEVARD*). The identification of luxury and a certain sort of good taste (seen in baroque art, exotic plants) with decadence and evil is central to film noir.

As for films noir set in the country, the country is as desolate in its way as the city landscapes. Long deserted dusty roads are the countryside of *POSTMAN* and *DETOUR*, and the Western *PURSUED* (1947), generally

regarded as part film noir, uses the barest and most fruitless Western scenery imaginable.

Settings tend to be in the public world rather than domestic. For the hero, a basic domestic ritual like eating is transferred from family to public eating place. Indeed, the lunch counter comes close to being one of the true icons of the form (as in *POSTMAN*, *THE KILLERS* (1946), *THE STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR*, and *OUT OF THE PAST*). Crucial personal encounters take place not in the home but, say, in a train (*STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*), in a supermarket (*DOUBLE INDEMNITY*) or in a seedy cafe (Mexican sequence of *OUT OF THE PAST*).

In this way the hero is denied an environment of safety, coziness, or rootedness. If such an atmosphere is evoked at all, it serves to sharpen the depiction of the noir world by being under threat from the latter (*KISS OF DEATH*) or actually destroyed by it (*THE BIG HEAT*). There is some play on this in *IN A LONELY PLACE*, with its telling images of the unmade bed before Laurel moves in, her bringing Dix coffee and the scene in the kitchen where he attacks the grapefruit with the serrated knife that he has through ignorance straightened out, thus linking lack of domesticity and violent impulse. More usually, when homes are shown, they are the homes of the villains and moreover are "abnormal" — they belong to single (i.e., "incomplete") people as in *LAURA*, or childless couples as in *GILDA* or *POSTMAN*, or, of course, gays as in *ROPE*. That these homes are abnormal is iconographically expressed once again in a style of luxury quite different from the cozy normality of the "ordinary family home."

STARS.

It is not so much specific stars (though there are Bogart, Mitchum, Lake, Graham) as certain types of star which characterize film noir. The appearance of women in film noir has been felicitously described by Cohn McArthur as having "startlingly unreal sensuality." It is above all in the faces that this quality is produced.

Make-up and coiffure are used in a way that draws attention to their own artifice while at the same time they create surfaces of considerable tactile impact and draw attention to aspects of the head, such as the mouth and hair, which are particularly associated with eroticism in our time. The long faces of Lauren Bacall, Veronica Lake and Lizbeth Scott are emphasized by waves of hair hanging down around them; the hair is groomed and lit lustrously, it flows in "natural" curves that have yet somehow obviously been coiffed; the foundation make-up makes the face very pale while the lips are heavy and dark. To this combination of artifice and sensuality is frequently added the use of luxurious clothes made of highly tactile, yet man-made fibers, and of course furs are often used to identify women with savage nature.

For the heroes, it is the imagery of hard-boiledness that prevails — with unpressed suits, ties loosened at the neck, low drawn hats and unshaven

faces. This bespeaks the heroes' lack of concern about their appearance and also indicates, social conventions being what they are, that these men are not married.

VISUAL STYLE

To discuss the influence of German Expressionism on film noir (chiaroscuro lighting, unbalanced composition, skewed camera angles) is a standard part of film noir analysis, most notably in an article by J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson. [\(6\)](#) Although the full extent of the Expressionist visual repertoire is only discernible in a minority of films (STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR, THE KILLERS, FAREWELL MY LOVELY), in a modified version the use of shadow and unbalanced composition does characterize film noir. For a fuller exploration of this, see the Place and Peterson article.

GAYS IN FILM NOIR

How are gays represented in film noir, and what are they doing in it? To see the iconography of gayness in film noir, let me straight away list some relevant characters and the iconographic features that label them gay:

FILM.....CHARACTER.....TRAITS

Female Characters

IN A LONELY PLACE. Martha — big-boned, hair drawn back, aggressive, hard voice.

REBECCA. Mrs. Danvers — severe, hair drawn back, hard voice.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE. Jo — tailored suits, shortish hair, overall military precision of dress

TONY ROME. Irene — fat, shortish hair, loud voiced

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('76). Frances Amthor — fat, shortish hair, loud voiced

Male Characters

THE MALTESE FALCON. Cairo — fastidious dress, crimped hair, perfume

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN. Bruno — fastidious dress, manicured nails

LAURA. Waldo — fastidious dress, love of art, bitchy wit

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('45). Lindsay — fastidious dress, knowledge of clothes, jewelry, perfume

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('76). Lindsay — same; see book.

BRUTE FORCE. Cpt. Munsey — fastidious dress, love of art, music

THE BIG SLEEP. General Sternwood — hothouse atmosphere
(this is most tenuous example)

P.J.. Quel — gaudy clothes, fussy hairstyle

Apart from these, one other film has of course to be mentioned — ROPE. The only reason I have not included it is that I have not seen it. Yet it is clearly the film noir in which gay characters are most explicit and central. (7) I have to hope that my not having seen it does not invalidate everything I have to say in this article. Mention may also briefly be made of CROSSFIRE. The book on which that was based had a gay man rather than a Jew as victim, but as the film is also a social message film, this had to be changed: Hollywood's liberalism could only stretch so far.

Several initial points may be made about the list above. First, it is clearly only in a minority of films noir that gay characters appear (I doubt if I have missed more than two or three), yet their absence from all other types of film and the caution with which even film noir had to introduce them suggests that they do nonetheless constitute a defining feature of film noir taken as a whole. Second, it will be noted how the iconography of male and female gays contrasts with that of straight men and women in film noir, not to the extent of cross-dressing, but in terms of glamorous and sensual as opposed to rough and severe for women, and carelessness as opposed to fastidiousness for men. Third, the iconography was not of course developed for film noir alone but has its roots in gay literature and lifestyles (here distorted and denigrated). It is noticeable that the lesbian iconography is less elaborated and precise than that for gay men (because lesbian culture has had greater difficulty in developing under the double oppression of gayness and femaleness). Fourth, what is significant about the iconography is that it is not explicitly sexual. Gays are thus defined by everything but the very thing that makes us different.

What are these gay characters doing in film noir? In the first instance, they are a further amplification of images of sexual "decadence" and "perversion" prevalent in the form:

TRAIT FILM/S

Nymphomania — THE BIG SLEEP

Pornography — THE BIG SLEEP

Old man + young woman — FAREWELL MY LOVELY, POSTMAN,
GILDA, NIAGARA, WOMAN IN THE WINDOW, P.J.

Old woman + young man — LAURA, SUNSET BOULEVARD, P.J.

Sado-masochism — PURSUED, THE BIG HEAT, BRUTE FORCE,

ROPE OF SAND, STRANGERS ON A TRAIN, KISS ME DEADLY

Incest — PURSUED

Transvestism — GUNN (I have not included this character as gay as there is no indication that he is, in fact, homosexual.)

This in turn relates to the central image of sexuality in the films — the femme fatale.

These images are all related first iconographically. Nearly all form part of the luxury milieu. Waldo in LAURA is the epitome of this. The opening tracking shot of the film round a room full of neatly arranged, over-fussy *objets d'art* immediately places the milieu, and his subsequently revealed obsession with clothes, wines, gossip and the arts confirms it. His witty heartlessness is first rammed home in his line, "I should be sincerely sorry to see my neighbors' children devoured by wolves," a line which calls attention to his childlessness and hence sexual "unnaturalness." Similarly we see or judge Quel (overdressed in shiny Kaftan tops) as housekeeper to Orbison's mistress, the nightclub in GILDA, the hothouse opening of THE BIG SLEEP, the penthouse apartment in ROPE.

The association of gayness and the luxury milieu works differently for the lesbian characters. In most cases, they are shown as working in this setting, as housekeeper (Mrs. Danvers), masseuse (Martha), or owner-manager (Jo Frances). This means that the milieu less clearly defines their character. It is determined by their employers in the first two cases, while Jo and Frances as brothel keepers are supplying an ambiance defined by the wants of men. This emphasis on lesbians as working women always carries strong elements of tyranny and violence, of servants to mistresses (Mrs. Danvers, Martha), of madames to their girls. This tyranny then shades into the characters' feelings of attraction to the woman in question (with the exception, so far as we know, of Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca). The equation of lesbian love with tyranny is also the strongest impression we get from the scene between Irene and Georgia in the caravan in TONY ROME (1967) and between George and Childie in THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE. The tyrannical form of employer/employee relationships which is established by the place of the lesbian relationship in the world of the classic film noir thus carries over into films where the lesbian characters are supposed to be each others' social equal.

The gay men and the femmes fatales share the same decor iconographically. The reason for this is spelled out in LAURA. Women can be legitimately identified with luxury, with obsessions with beauty and appearance — Laura herself is the epitome of all that is alluring in such a world. Men who are associated with it, however, be they gay (Waldo) or gigolos (Shelby), are weak, villainous or depraved (or all three). Hence, the touchstone of male normality in LAURA, McPherson (Dana Andrews), is very much an outsider to the milieu and largely repelled by it except insofar as he is attracted to its feminine

representative, Laura. The ideological pairing of male homosexuality with luxury and decadence (with connotations of impotence and sterility) is of a piece with the acceptable linking of women with luxury (women as expensive things to win and keep, women as bearers of their husbands' wealth) and decadence (women as beings without sexuality save for the presence of men). The feeling that gay men are like women yet not women produces the "perverse" tone of this mode of iconographic representation.

In terms of narrative structure, the gay characters when not actually villains (Cairo, Bruno, Waldo) frequently constitute one of the blind alleys of the labyrinth, lengthening the process of solving the mystery or threatening the heterosexual union. Examples of the former process are in *TONY ROME* (Rome learns nothing from tracking down and cross-examining Georgia and Irene); *FAREWELL MY LOVELY* (1945 — all Lindsay does is lead Marlowe to being a murder suspect; 1976 — the sequence in Jules Amthor's house — see above — becomes the sequence in Frances Amthor's brothel). In *P.J.*, Quel is specifically there to send P.J. in one direction while he thinks he's going in the other, and the visit to the seedy "Gay Caballero" in search of promised information yields P.J. nothing but a beating. Examples of threatening a heterosexual union occur in *IN A LONELY PLACE*, where Martha sows seeds of doubt in Laurel's mind. Narratively, the scene in which Martha appears is placed between the scene in the night club where Laurel and Dix feel they are under surveillance and the scene in which Sylvia blurts out that Laurel has seen the police again without telling Dix. This chain of scenes seems to suggest Martha is a link in the chain of the couple's gradual separation). 1962's *WALK ON THE WILD SIDE* has Jo keep Hally and Dove apart. In *LAURA* Waldo always acts to keep McPherson and Laura, and indeed Laura and all her men, apart and ultimately emerges as the villain.

In *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* ironically Bruno's murdering Miriam to make Guy free to marry Anne actually makes it more difficult for them to marry because of the suspicion of murder hanging over Guy. In the case of the last mentioned film, there is a particularly close fit between the labyrinth structure and homosexuality. Guy's visit to Bruno's parents' house accomplishes neither its overt purpose (the murder) nor its covert purpose (warning Bruno's father). But since Bruno has set this up and since Guy finds himself talking to Bruno, who is waiting for Guy in bed in pajamas, may we not, as Gerald Peary has suggested to me, read this as a blind alley actually constructed in the hope of homosexual seduction?

In most instances, gays function as both villains and frustrations of the heterosexual development, as do the femmes fatales. This in fact seems to be central to film noir. One has only to compare the standard police film, in which family/sex life is always seen in opposition to or as a respite from the hero's job to see how distinctive is film noir's intertwining of the job (nailing the villain) and sex (getting it together with the woman).

Our society distinguishes with some anxiety the public world of work from the private world of family, affection and sexuality on the assumption that the instrumental purposes of work (getting things done, making money, acting efficiently) would be undermined by too much emotional or sexual byplay. Film noir, however, tends to collapse these two worlds into each other. The hero's work becomes sexual — McPherson falls in love with the woman whose "death" he is investigating; looking after Gilda becomes Johnny's job; a brothel (A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE) is actually a place of sexual labor; and Joe in SUNSET BOULEVARD (1950) is employed virtually as a stud. The women are involved in the plot not just as a "love-interest" but as agents and enemies — Brigid uses her charms to trick Spade and to attempt to acquire the Falcon; Cora suffuses the cafe with sexuality in POSTMAN. Similarly, gay men introduce a permanent sexual potential into the world of work. They are unsettling to the puritan (non-sexual) safety of the instrumental world. The work of intellectual discussion in ROPE is undermined by the actual sexual realization a few hours before the film begins of what they are supposedly only talking about. Quel appraises P.J.'s body before employing him, spies on him and Maureen dancing together, chats him up at the dance in Haiti, invites him to a gay club to give him information (actually to have him beaten up).

In other words, the film endlessly introduces a sexual current into what should be straightforward moments of employment, surveillance and investigation. Lesbians provide a further turn of the screw. As women with *jobs* (not just *roles* as wives, mothers or lovers) they enter the instrumental world, but because they are women they can also act in concert with other women, thus effectively blocking the hero in both the instrumental and the sexual spheres. Examples are the closed encounter of Rome with Georgia and Irene, the sense of two women ganging up on a man in IN A LONELY PLACE and REBECCA, and the triumph of Jo's world, the brothel, over Dove's love and career.

The sexuality of film noir is also distinctive in that it does not require an initiative on the part of the hero to activate it. The gays' sexuality is developed before the coming of the hero, while the femmes fatales are often notable for their taking the initiative in and expressing of their sexuality (e.g., Cora, Gilda, Lauren Bacall in THE BIG SLEEP). However, their sexual independence from the hero is undercut by the principle that no sexual satisfaction is possible away from the hero. The femme fatale (like the nymphomaniac) is an image of frustration, alive with sexual desire that cannot be satisfied. This is often expressed by her being attached to an older man or an indifferent gang boss. Such an image is amplified in the gay characters by the culturally widespread notion (reinforced by the non-sexuality of the gay iconography) that gays are intensely physical beings who cannot do anything physically and hence vibrate with frustrated twisted sexual energy. This is most true of lesbian characters. The introduction of Martha as a masseuse handling Laurel's flesh is the most physical yet non-sexual (in the genital sense) image in the film. As Martha tells Laurel to leave Dix, the shot from below suggests the intense physicality and frustration of the

being whose sexuality attempts to operate independently of the hero.

Similarly we have the shot of Jo in *A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE* with her back to the camera and the squared-up shoulders of her perfectly tailored suit physically present against the light of the window. She is saying, "Sometimes I've waited years for what I've wanted," while stretched languorously across the bed in a lace housecoat is what she really wants, Hally. (Later Jo is made to utter a supposedly gay credo, setting its sights against eroticism: "Can any man love a woman for herself, give her the beauty of life without the reek of lust?") Inflections of the images are also realized in male gay characters. Waldo expresses his eroticism in idealizing Laura, no more sleeping with or loving her than he does any of his other *objets d'art*; Lindsay in *FAREWELL MY LOVELY* is physically alive by virtue of an interest in perfumes and women's clothes; Munsey in *BRUTE FORCE* (and presumably Paul Henreid in *ROPE OF FLESH*) expresses his gayness through a sadistic beating.

Sexuality independent of the hero is shown to be neurotic, frustrated, and sour; yet it also means that the hero's own sexuality goes unchallenged. Approached by a faggot, or a femme fatale, the hero has the whole moral force of Hollywood and Western culture and male chauvinism to fall back on in order to refuse the offer. But in this way, his own sexual adequacy is not tested. It is of course to be assumed — film noir does not call the potency of male sexuality into question. Yet there hovers around it an implication of male uncertainty about sexuality. Here the gay characters start to serve a different function from that of the femmes fatales.

Several films noirs feature soldiers who have just left, or are about to leave the service (*DEAD RECKONING*, *CROSSFIRE*, *THE BLUE DALIA*). These films were made at the period when men were returning from active service, sometimes several years after living with women. The all-male group often seems the norm in noir films, not only those just mentioned but also in *BRUTE FORCE*, *THE BIG HEAT* (here Debbie is excluded from the gambling scene), or the men's club of *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW*. The intense relationship of two men is also common as in *DEAD RECKONING* (Bogart: "He was laughing, tough and lonesome." To Scott: "I loved him more than you"), *THE BIG COMBO* (Bettini cries when Fante is killed by dynamite, "Don't leave me, Fante," and turns stool pigeon), *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* (Walter and Keys). This is not confined to film noir obviously. It is true of Westerns, Howard Hawks' films, or even, according to Leslie Fiedler, the whole of American literature. [\(8\)](#)

But perhaps the potential homosexuality of all-male groups and male-male relationships is much nearer the surface in both the image of armed service and prison life and in the experience of it, too. In this context, the gay characters serve as an example of sick male-male relationships (that is, sexual ones) over against healthy (non-sexual) ones. Lest we imagine Gallagher "loves" Joe in *BRUTE FORCE*, we have

Munsey to remind us what a perverted male-male relationship is like. Lest we imagine Spade's suspicion of Brigit is itself suspicious, we have Cairo and Guttman to remind us of how far Spade is removed from that sort of thing.

GILDA

GILDA has a different emphasis. Here the hero (Glenn Ford/Johnny) does have a close relationship with another man (Charles Farrel/Ballen) which is implicitly homosexual, and this does cast doubts on his reaction to the femme fatale (Rita Hayworth/Gilda) and indeed upon the actual "fatal" quality of the latter. The gayness of the Johnny/Ballen relationship is implicit yet definitely enough etched in, even without use of the gay iconography. There is dialogue about the three of us (Johnny, Ballen, and Ballen's cane) who will never be split up by anything or anyone. Exchanged glances are held longer than glances between non-sexual partners normally are. Ballen "picks up" Johnny for no apparent reason — altruism is not presented as one of his characteristics, and Johnny has no observable talent apart from being pretty. Perhaps I may be forgiven for quoting dubious evidence here, one of the first lines in the film where Johnny says to Ballen, "You must lead a gay life." Later, even Gilda emphasizes the parallels between herself and Johnny as Ballen's pick-ups. [\(9\)](#)

When Gilda turns up as Ballen's wife, Johnny's reaction can be read as straight jealousy. But the film also provides another reason, which in turn provides a (naïve) explanation for his relationship with Ballen — namely, they are an old affair that somehow went sour. This is why he resents Gilda, but it might also be "why" he is in a gay relationship, that she has put him off women.

Two points amplify this interpretation. First of all, we have to be careful not to assess Gilda's characterization by today's standards — perhaps in 1946 her really quite mild promiscuity was shocking. The advertising for GILDA played her up as a bad woman, and Hayworth had made a notable appearance as a femme fatale in BLOOD AND SAND (1941). Yet her image outside of GILDA (1946) is also close to that developed later by Monroe — innocent sexuality or woman as the Life Force. Certainly it is something like this that she embodies in the musicals and her dancing (with its Latin-ness that is carefree but not vulgarly sensual) and perhaps in ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS (1939). There seems to be at least as much carry over of this innocent sexuality as of the femme fatale of film noir in the film's first shot of her, which in a close-up catches her on a movement, head up, throwing back her hair from across her face, looking and smiling straight past the camera.

Then again, she is given the song, "Put the Blame on Mame," to sing quietly in the deserted night club to the sympathetic and philosophical men's room attendant. Here, the scene depicts her friendship with a man who repeatedly stresses his distance from and contempt for the luxury milieu of the nightclub, with the quiet reflectiveness of the setting and her delivery of the song (as she accompanies herself on a guitar),

and of course the words of the song which admittedly ambiguously criticize the way that men always put the blame on women's sexuality for natural disasters. All these imply that Gilda is far from fatal and that there is something "pathological" in Johnny's soon violent response to her. (However, as the song suggests, his "pathology" may be a typical response.)

The second amplification of this interpretation occurs after the apparent death of Ballen in the exploding airplane. Johnny and Gilda marry, but it is clear that the marriage is not consummated. The labyrinthine structures of the film have hitherto concentrated on Ballen, the mirror-maze effects of the night club, and the impenetrability of his secret (tungsten) sadomasochism in heterosexual relationships. These structures hover around this sense of violence and have already been hinted at in the image of Gilda with a whip at the Mardi Gras ball and in the character of Ballen, with his phallic knife/cane, his thin-lipped, scarred face, and his references to the excitement of cruelty and "other strong emotions." What GILDA seems to point to is something that most films noir try to keep at bay — that all sexuality or all male sexuality is sick. Where most films noir evoke sick sexuality everywhere except in the hero, GILDA has him caught between gayness, in no way presented positively, and sadomasochism.

Of the films noir I have seen, only GILDA questions the adequacy of male sexuality. Such a questioning is perhaps implicit in others — with McPherson's obsession with the "dead" Laura, for instance, or the dark sadistic side of Dix in IN A LONELY PLACE (though the sexuality of this is not explored). But usually male sexual adequacy is ensured because the hero's adequacy is taken as read but not demonstrated. Heroes just are sexually adequate unless we are told to the contrary. And to deflect any doubts that linger, we have such unambiguously sick images of frustration and maliciousness as the femmes fatales, nymphos, queers and dykes.

Notes:

[1.](#) There is not one simple sexual ideology in a culture. There is struggle between different ideologies, rooted in different material circumstances (male-female, straight-gay, etc.). There is contradiction between these ideologies and within them.

[2.](#) Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment*, 8:1 (Spring 72).

[3.](#) Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Anchor, 1955).

[4.](#) Ed Buscombe, "The Idea of Genre," *Screen*; Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972); Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974).

[5.](#) McArthur, *ibid.*; Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1964).

[6.](#) J A. Place and L. S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," *Film Comment*, 10:1 (Spring 74).

[7.](#) There are accounts of ROPE in Higham and Greenberg's *Hollywood in the Forties* and in *Movie Reader*.

[8.](#) Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1960).

[9.](#) There is external evidence to suggest that the gayness of the Ballen/Johnny relationship was deliberate. For instance, in his article on Rita Hayworth in *Focus on Film*, No. 10 (Summer 72), John Kobal refers to an interview with Glenn Ford in which Ford says, "Of course, we knew their relationship was homosexual."

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Fox and his Friends An exchange of views

by Bob Cant and Andrew Britton

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Fassbinder's FOX

— Bob Cant

Fassbinder's FOX is a film about the corruptive nature of capitalism. The fact that the main characters are gay men does of course make it interesting for gay men but it is not primarily a film which attempts to Deal With The Problem of Homosexuality.

The story is about a gay fairground worker, Fox, who wins a lottery and comes into contact with a group of rich fashionable gay men. He begins an affair with one of them, Eugen, whose father is the owner of a long established print works. Eugen and his family proceed to exploit Fox until all his money is finished and then they reject him. The last shot is of the dead Fox lying in a railway station with an empty Valium bottle beside him as two youths go through his clothes. The major theme of the film is the way in which money corrupts all relationships. Eugen exploits Fox's feelings for him because Fox's money can get him and his family out of their financial difficulties. Eugen also debases his relationship with Philip by rejecting him till his financial problems are solved. In the final scene, too, there is the mysterious conversation between Fox's previous lover and his antique dealer friend about some financial transaction — this is never fully explained but simply reinforces Fassbinder's point that in a bourgeois society all relationships have economic overtones. In many ways one has to see the film as a fable with Fox as the innocent abroad in an evil world in the tradition of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Voltaire's *Candide*, and Dostoyevsky's *Prince Mishkin*.

However to treat the film as though it were just a fable is to underestimate its complexity. There are many scenes in the film which acknowledge Fassbinder's debt to Hollywood — such as the scene by the French windows with the lace curtains (with all its implications of

property and exclusion) and the conversations in the car (creating an atmosphere of growing intimacy between two characters). These scenes are significant not only in a cinematic sense but also in a sense that they indicate the dependence of postwar West Germany on the USA. This can be further seen in the bar scene when Fox talks to the two GIs who are only interested in having drinks bought for them and fucks supplied for them. We are reminded that West Germany — like most of Western Europe — is a neo-colony of American imperialism. The lack of choice that Fox has in most of his relationships is as limited as the choice that most Western Europeans have over the economic destiny of the countries they live in. Lest this be seen as crude European nationalism, the point is further developed in the scenes in Morocco. Fox, the innocent, and Eugen, the symbol of a European bourgeoisie dying in the face of American domination, are only too ready to become the exploiters in relation to a man from a less developed country. Relationships are more than just a matter of good individuals and bad individuals — they are a clear reflection of the economic structure of a society and are no doubt intended here to be seen as an allegory of such.

Many gay people have seen this film as a putdown of gays. It is quite true that people who know nothing of gay life are unlikely to be attracted by the scenes of the gay ghetto as it is portrayed in the film. But then one must recognize that the gay ghetto is not a pleasant place, and those who succeed in its jungle-like atmosphere are likely to be either young and beautiful or just plain rich. The rather nasty group of people who are Eugen's friends seem to me to be a fairly accurate picture of one part of the gay world, claustrophobic and bitchy. Philip's boutique (where there is no natural light and lots of mirrors) and the antique shop (encouraging buyers to imitate living in another age just as the ghetto encourages gays to imitate others' life styles) portray a world which is self-conscious and yet desperate not to face up to its own reality. As gay people we have nothing to gain by pretending our lives are heroic and free from group-imposed destructiveness.

Fassbinder does offer some little hope in the bar scenes where Fox meets his friends from the time before his lottery win. Theirs too is an unreal world with the flower sellers, the drag and the woman consciously trying to look like Marlene Dietrich and singing of Shanghai (a city which no longer exists as it was in the song). But there is some comradeship — the people in that bar are not free from the pressures of capitalism but they do not forget the need to help each other, and they are even prepared to help Fox when he moves away from them.

This is an excellent film — as damning as Buñuel or Chabrol with its comments on bourgeois society. But if anyone wants to see a gay chauvinist film which papers over the cracks then they should go elsewhere. This is a film that must be seen with a socialist perspective.

It was very illuminating — if disconcerting — to see Bob Cant's review of FOX appearing in the same issue of *Gay Left* (JC 12) as Richard Dyer's admirable analysis of "Gays in Films." On page ten, in discussing, amongst other works, *THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT* — also by Fassbinder — Dyer seems to me to have said very pointedly what also needs to be said about FOX: The film tries to suggest that gay relationships can be taken as a valid metaphor for the exploitiveness of bourgeois-capitalist society as a whole. I found the film offensive in the extreme. And since it is possible, apparently, for a popular audience — let alone a gay socialist — to read it as a damning indictment of the bourgeoisie, I feel it is important to raise one or two points in reply.

1. There is no mention in the article of the reception of the film in the bourgeois press. David Robinsons remarked in the *Times* to the effect that the chronicle of exploitation is all the more convincing for being set in a homosexual milieu, and that it represents an honest and realistic picture of gay relationships. Such comments are typical of what has been the general emphasis. This would seem to suggest both that a Concern With The Problem of Homosexuality, as Cant puts it, is rather more central to the film — and to its reception by the audience — than he tries to imply; and that its supposed subversion of bourgeois assumptions is rather less so.

2. The film's German title, *FAUSTRECHT DER FREIHEIT* (literally, *FISTRIGHT OF FREEDOM*), carries connotations of the survival of the fittest, which, indeed, is the English title provided by Peter Cowie in his *International Film Guide* for 1976. Clearly, Social Darwinism has been crucial for capitalist ideology, and a film concerned with its ramifications within institutions and personal relationships might be interesting and valuable. What is objectionable in FOX is that the notion is introduced *not* as an ideological category, but as the inevitable order of the reality depicted. In other words, the ideology is reinforced. A Fate motif is introduced in the opening scenes in the fairground (consider the obtrusive emphasis on the deserted Big Wheel, revolving inexorably like the Wheel of Fortune), in the dialogue ("That's Fate!"), and in the device of the lottery, on which the plot turns. One can, perhaps, attribute part of the film's critical success to this carefully contrived impression of "tragic" necessity. Insofar as FOX portrays "the homosexual predicament" and reinforces deep-rooted preconceptions about it, the film allows the spectator to sit back and think, "God! What awful lives they lead!" Insofar as it permits identification with the dumb loser, and enforces the generalization, "This is how things are in this world," it encourages acquiescence in the movement of the narrative and, ultimately, in the status quo. The spectator can leave the cinema filled with an ennobling compassion for a despised and rather pathetic minority group, and a complacent conviction of his own, and everybody else's, helplessness. FOX is, in fact, the least ideologically subversive of films.

Cant talks about Fox's "lack of choice," in a context which implies that there is a direct analogy between choice in immediate personal relationships and our lack of control "over the economic destiny of the countries" we live in. This is a fatuous equation; it is difficult to see how any individual movement towards self-determination, or any radical political action could begin, or even be conceived, if it were true. It is deeply significant that there is not the slightest mention of Gay Liberation in the film, not a glimpse of a character, gay or straight, who either wants or knows how to break out of the repressive environment. The only characters who are permitted any degree of distance from the central action either observe it in a spirit compounded of self-interest and resignation (Uncle Max, Eugen's father) or are provided with sterile, bitter tirades of disgust and self-disgust (Fox's sister). The film concludes that one is "inside the whale," in Orwell's phrase, and one can't do anything about it. The "lack of choice," the "downhill-all-the-way" structure, in which everything goes wrong with somewhat facile regularity, depends upon the deliberate choice of an ineffectual protagonist, whose defeat is inscribed from the start. THE MERCHANT OF FOUR SEASONS, another Fassbinder film, works in the same way. In both cases there is an attempt to immerse the spectator in the process of disintegration.

3. Bob Cant suggests that FOX is "about the corruptive nature of capitalism," and that the film is seriously concerned with the economic determination of human relationships. This formula seems to me objectionable on several counts. Unless one is willing to accept that "filthy lucre" is a subversive concept, and that people with money tend to be unpleasant" is a significant judgment on "the pressures of capitalism," it is difficult to point to any coherent, *serious* awareness of the "economic structure of a society." Bourgeois audiences find no difficulty in accepting the proposition that "money corrupts all relationships." And the victimization of the loser by rapacious hangers-on has become a staple narrative-structure precisely because it so emphatically *confirms* complacency, allowing us to feel outraged by a collection of vultures who are very definitely not *us*.

If the film were really concerned with the perversion of human relationships under capitalism as that is reflected in the lives of a particular group of people (in this case, homosexuals — and if that *is not* the concern, then the use of gayness is superfluous) one would require the following:

(a) An exploration of what it means to be gay in a working class environment, and how this differs from what it means to be gay in an upper middle class environment. As it is, Fox-as-proletarian does not exist in the film beyond such qualities as bad table manners and bourgeois myths, which see the proletarian hero as slightly (or, as here, exceptionally) stupid, gullibly generous, emotionally sincere (as opposed to the affectation and superficiality of the bourgeoisie—consider Eugen's "We're not starry-eyed lovers anymore") and sexually potent, in a modern variation on the "close-to-the-earth" syndrome. The class theme

is, in fact, only trivially present, and the film's central conflict would remain if Fox were an aristocratic gay visitor from Mars. Cant does seem aware of this at some level, since he can talk at one point about relationships being "more than just a matter of good individuals and bad individuals," and at another about the fable of "the innocent abroad in an evil world," without any acknowledgement that there might be some contradiction between the two.

(b) An exploration of why and how the bourgeois gays depicted have come to acquiesce in the institutions of the society which oppresses them. As it is, there is no sense *whatever* in the film that gayness and bourgeois ideology are in any way incompatible. Indeed, as the action progresses, and the bourgeois gays whom Fox has met at the beginning appear one by one in positions of exploitative power, any distinction between victimization by predatory homosexuals and victimization by a predatory bourgeoisie becomes so blurred that we are left with, at least, the impression of an alliance for mutual benefit. It clearly needs to be said that although gay relationships may become exploitative under capitalism, as any relationships may, the attempt to elide the two is pernicious.

(c) A sense of gay oppression. There is nothing in FOX to show that gayness is subject to ideological, social or legal constraints. Why no awareness of the economic and ideological factors which determine the existence of, say, the gay bar? Why no mention of the social stereotyping which associates gayness with interior decorating and sultry boutiques? Why is gayness taken as paradigmatic of "a world which is self-conscious and yet desperate not to face up to its own reality"? I quite agree with Cant about the symbolism of boutique and antique-shop, but that symbolism has nothing essentially to do with gayness at all. Instead of exploring gay life-styles in terms of their various, complex determinants, Fassbinder presents them as a kind of existential metaphor, an image (deprived of any ideological context) of "exploitiveness" which perpetuates every received idea about homosexuality — its squalor, its ephemerality ("one affair after another"), its triviality, its decadence (the scene with the singer, an imitation-Dietrich backed by an enormous photograph of a naked muscleman), its inhumanity.

Unlike Cant, I feel that the inhabitants of the bar are consistently portrayed as callous, petty and malicious, and I found the use of the plump flower-seller's attempted seduction of Fox to arouse an automatic response of revulsion from the grotesque quite intolerable. Once all the stereotypes and the finality of "the predicament" have been affirmed, the spectator can be invited to feel pity. One can point to a comparable procedure in *THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES* (which Fassbinder produced), where, after all the fuss and bother about the activities of the murder reflecting the viciousness of capitalist society (a theme which, again, is not significantly *there* in the film, but which has earned it considerable praise — including that of *Gay News*), we come back, through the use of Bach's "Have mercy, Lord, on me" for the opening

and closing titles, to the real business of "grief for sin" and the pitiable pervert. Fassbinder seems to me, in fact, the archetypal watered-down radical, whose extraordinary current popularity with bourgeois critics can be associated with the opportunity his films provide for becoming aware of, and condemning, some of the more obvious unpleasantness of the middle class without having too many basic assumptions disturbed in the process. The recurrent tone of rather frigid irony, shading at times into the misanthropic, is admirably suited to this purpose, as to the enrollment of the spectator in a stable position from which the inevitability of the action can be observed.

4. Many of the film's targets are reassuringly non-controversial, and curiously anachronistic. Elegant table manners, a familiarity with French cuisine, cultural philistinism and the "family tradition" of *Chateauneuf du Pape* are easy, comfortable foes, from which we can dissociate ourselves without difficulty. To gauge the thinness of Fassbinder's conception, one has only to place these scenes beside, say, the Christmas scenes in *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS*, a film made in Hollywood in 1955 by Douglas Sirk, for whom Fassbinder is always declaring his admiration, but who is completely without Fassbinder's rather glib fatalism (consider, as an example of it, the way in which Fox and Eugen come across their Arab pick-up in "The Meeting Place of the Dead"). In Sirk's film the *insidiousness* of the oppression of bourgeois good manners is felt and conveyed with a subtlety and insight besides which the meal scenes in *FOX* seem dismally obvious and crude.

5. Bob Cant implies that there is no alternative to "gay chauvinism" on the one hand and the "fairly accurate picture of one part of the gay world" which he claims *FOX* to be on the other. One can readily agree that "the gay ghetto is not a pleasant place," that it is inadvisable to pretend that our lives are "heroic" (*do we pretend that?*) and that we, like everyone else, are subject to social and ideological determination in various ways, *some* of which are beyond our immediate control. This is *not* the same thing as saying that we should countenance a film such as *FOX*, whose unawareness of ideology is quite staggering, and which attempts, in a most simplistic and destructive way, to appropriate what it calls "the gay world" as an all-purpose metaphor for a rotten civilization. There seems to be a widely held belief — attributable, presumably, to fear of a charge of "gay chauvinism" — that we should commend and applaud every "exposure" of the "jungle-like atmosphere" (Cant's fine phrase), which we, more than any other class of people, are thought to breathe. "Chauvinism" is now, of course, a loaded word, and probably, in the present context, an inappropriate one, if all that is meant is a degree of enthusiasm for Gay Liberation which various bourgeois/liberal observers feel to be "excessive." I think that "proper pride" is admirable and sorely needed, especially at the present time. On the other hand, a clear, honest, coherent portrayal of the ways in which gay relationships are repressed, perverted, curtailed in bourgeois capitalist society might be equally admirable. This is *not* what *FOX* is. Its version of homosexuality degrades us all, and should be roundly denounced.

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Leaving the dance: Bertolucci's gay images

by Will Aitken

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What follows is an examination of gay motifs and images as they figure in six films by Bernardo Bertolucci—*THE GRIM REAPER* (1961), *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION* (1964), *RIGOLETTO* (1970), *THE CONFORMIST* (1970), *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* (1972), *1900* (1976).

Gay sexuality has never been the central concern of any of Bertolucci's films; none of his films has been more than incidentally "about" homosexuality. On the contrary, his films seem to be more consistently concerned with the incessantly political nature of existence.

There is, however, underlying this central political concern a constant fascination with/abhorrence of homosexuality. It runs through these six films and in many ways reflects or even intensifies the political concerns that lie at these films' surface. This article deals with how gay sexuality appears in Bertolucci's various films, how he presents and deals with it and, finally, how the *appearance* of gay sexuality has altered in his films as he has matured as a filmmaker.

"Sacrificing oneself to one's passions — but to passions one does not feel!"—Girodet

"Although I think *1900* is a movie there is a lot to say about, my critics keep distant from it. It's as if they were fucked up the ass and refused to come."—Bertolucci

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

If there ever comes a time when I've forgotten what it feels like to be twenty-one, I'll go see Bernardo Bertolucci's *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION* again.

An adaptation, in spirit if not quite in exact plot, of Stendhal's celebration of youth, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION* offers an exceptional experience: the evocation of the

audacity and tentativeness of the time when we're still young but aging fast. What is unique about this evocation comes from the fact that it arises from and we see it through the eyes of youth—Bertolucci was twenty-two when he made *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION*, his second feature film, in 1964.

The black and white film begins with a series of intentionally disjointed scenes in which Fabrizio, the young central character (Stendhal's Fabrice), walks about the outskirts of Parma with his friend Agostino. Fabrizio tries alternately to convince Agostino to grow up, to reject his bourgeois origins, to join the Communist Party (all things Fabrizio has, with admirable perspicacity, already accomplished). At their final meeting, Fabrizio offers to take Agostino to visit his mentor, an older unmarried man, Professor Cesare.

We next see Fabrizio standing at the edge of a smooth-surfaced lake. On the opposite shore, naked working-class boys leave the water to dress. At Fabrizio's feet lies a neat pile of clothing. Agostino has at last followed Fabrizio's urgings, rejected his life and walked into the water.

The eve of Agostino's funeral, Fabrizio talks, compulsively, incessantly, about Agostino—"he had hair like the feathers of a canary"—trying to make sense of the friend's suicide. Fabrizio's aunt, Gina, visiting from Genoa, listens, her pensive smile revealing the understanding she has of Fabrizio's love for Agostino.

There's a subtle, elliptical beauty in Bertolucci's handling of this love, not because he attempts to disguise it, but rather because he reveals that love through the developing tenderness between Fabrizio and Gina.

It is finally Gina and not Agostino whom Fabrizio takes to meet Professor Cesare. There in his cluttered monastic quarters, Cesare and Fabrizio talk about Agostino's death while a suddenly jealous Gina attempts to drown out their conversation by playing the radio. And it is here that Gina and Fabrizio read to each other from Oscar Wilde ("The only man with more illusions than the dreamer is the man of action").

What becomes increasingly clear as the film sweeps along through the confusions of youth (and the stunning visual equivalents Bertolucci finds for that confusion) is that Fabrizio is attempting to build his life by rejection—first his family and their bourgeois politics, then his love for Agostino, finally his love for Gina. The film becomes Bertolucci's *buildingungs* movie, a series of farewells to the past. (The film's title comes from Talleyrand: "Who has not known the life before the revolution doesn't know the sweetness of living.")

The replacement of Agostino by his aunt, Gina, the substitution of one taboo for another—a sort of homosexuality by a sort of incest—ultimately leads Fabrizio, in his quest for an unremarkable life, to ditch Gina and marry a respectable bourgeois. By the end of the film Fabrizio realizes his nostalgia is for the beauty of life as it is in the present. He repudiates the Party and his socially unacceptable relationship with

Gina (she is, after all, quite obviously his senior by many years) and avidly pursues a normal life, devoid of radicalism, be it political or sexual.

This attempt at rejection of family and class is explicable and, considering the class, entirely laudable. Bertolucci, though, instead of seeing Agostino and Gina and the homosexuality and incest they represent as destructive challenges to the family (and therefore to the central essential unit of the capitalist structure), insists on viewing them as manifestations of bourgeois decadence. It is here we first view the ambivalence that will intensify with each successive film: Is variant sexuality decadent or subversive? That Fabrizio ends up sacrificing Agostino and Gina in order eventually to regain bourgeois respectability indicates one aspect of Bertolucci's enduring ambivalence.

What gives *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION* its tone of ineffable sadness is the confluence we sense between Fabrizio's life and Bertolucci's own. All his central heroes, until *LAST TANGO IN PARIS*, are roughly Bertolucci's own age at the time he is making each film. His films, like Fabrizio's life, have grown decreasingly political, nearly anti-political—that is, until the radical surprise of *1900*—because love for the sensuality of life as it appears to him is contradictory to the necessity for political upheaval. (And yet, I want to add, a sensual involvement with the world must surely precede the impulse to change it, improve it.) Similarly, the replacement of Agostino by Gina is presented as necessary growth, a gaining of adulthood through mature heterosexuality.

The irony then arises that Fabrizio must put behind him even that heterosexual love because it exists outside established norms, too erotically informed to be completely acceptable in Fabrizio's milieu. The deliberateness of these rejections, particularly as Fabrizio is aware (and, evidently, Bertolucci, too) of their deliberateness, gives the film a quality more elegiac than valedictory, a character and its creator mourning what he was and what he won't allow himself to be.

THE GRIM REAPER

Moving from Bertolucci's second feature to his first is going reluctantly from the startling operatic lyricism of the Godard-influenced *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION* to the somber, highly formal structure and compositions of *THE GRIM REAPER* (*LA COMMARE SECCA*).

THE GRIM REAPER essentially is an homage to the late Pier Paolo Pasolini. Prior to making it in 1961 at the age of twenty, Bertolucci's chief film experience had come from working as assistant director on Pasolini's *ACCATONI*. Bertolucci's father, the respected Italian poet and film critic, had introduced his twelve-year-old son to Pasolini. The young Bertolucci admired Pasolini's poetry, and when Bertolucci himself became a prize-winning poet several years later, Pasolini returned the compliment. Soon Bertolucci was being touted in the Italian press as Pasolini's young protégé.

THE GRIM REAPER is the work of a protégé; stiff and restrained, we sense Bertolucci is uncomfortable working in Pasolini's lower-depths tradition. A prostitute is found murdered near a public park in Rome. A RASHOMON-like structure allows the events leading up to the murder to be described from several viewpoints, with a late afternoon rainstorm interrupting each retelling in order to provide the viewer with a still point from which chronologically to link up the separate viewpoints. Each person in the park prior to the murder remembers a man lurking in the shadows: we're led to assume that he is the murderer. But then, when the police have finished their investigation without reaching a solution, the man from the shadows comes forward. He's a young gay man who was cruising the park that night. After much hesitation, he has found the courage to blow his cover (remember, this is 1962) and lead the police to the actual murderer.

RIGOLETTO/THE SPIDER'S STRATEGEM

Bertolucci made *RIGOLETTO*, released in North America as *THE SPIDER'S STRATEGEM*, for Italian television in 1970. Here he begins to develop the twinning motif that will run through *THE CONFORMIST*, *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* and *1900*. This time round, a young man returns to his father's town to investigate the legend of his murdered father as anti-Fascist hero. The twinning comes up first because both father and son are played by the same actor, Giulio Brogi). In addition, flashbacks from the son's present to the father's past (as narrated by the father's mistress and comrades) work as enigmatic mirrors.

Shot in the miniature city of Sabbioneta (in the film campily called Tara), *RIGOLETTO* is a faithful working out of the central story of Borges' *Labyrinth*, "Theme of a Traitor and Hero." The father, leader of the local anti-Fascist resistance, is discovered by his comrades to be a double agent. At the father's insistence, his own assassination is arranged to occur in public (during the opera of the film's title) so as to appear as though the Fascists have murdered the leader of the resistance rather than that the resistance has murdered one of its traitorous own. By creating the myth of his own death, by transforming himself from traitor to anti-Fascist martyr, the father becomes both traitor and hero.

The fascination with the traitor-hero might have its roots in Bertolucci's own shifting allegiances. His bourgeois rebels, Fabrizio for one, reject their own class and end up feeling nostalgic over what they've rejected and apprehensive about their loyalty to a new cause. Marcello in *THE CONFORMIST* escapes his eccentric, decadent family in order to embrace the virile purity of fascism but ultimately betrays the fascists in their turn. The fear appears and is affirmed again and again: once a traitor, always a traitor. A critic in *Ecran* pointed out that, with *1900*, Bertolucci has attempted to obliterate this enduring uneasiness of the apostate by becoming "more proletarian than the proletariat."

There are implicit homoerotic connotations to the doubling theme. For example, the father's mistress eventually offers herself to the son as a way to his father's love, recognizing that the son wants the father as

much as he wants the truth; in the end the son actually becomes the father. However, RIGOLETTO seems less concerned with gay characters or gay love than either THE GRIM REAPER or BEFORE THE REVOLUTION. There does appear one memorable image of sexual ambiguity that Bertolucci will use again with even greater resonance in THE CONFORMIST. An ubiquitous servant boy seems to provoke curiosity in the son in RIGOLETTO; the boy is forever appearing and disappearing, wearing the farm boy's straw hat and flashing an indecipherable smile. Finally the son finds himself alone in a room with the boy. The boy smiles knowingly, seductively and then removes his straw hat: a mass of long black hair tumbles down and the boy saunters away, now quite obviously an adolescent girl.

THE CONFORMIST

THE CONFORMIST somehow represents the culmination of all Bertolucci's earlier work (he has said he makes "always the same film," just as "the robins always sing the same song"). It has the twinning, the mirror images and events confronting each other across the film; the investigation of the father-figure under suspicion; the hero's consuming quest for a normal rather than a double life; and, most notably, the complete emergence of gay sexuality as an erotic possibility.

THE CONFORMIST was Bertolucci's first real period-piece. And what a period—Italy, 1938. It's a highly stylized Art Deco Italy of grand shining marble spaces and tight bourgeois parlors leopard-striped by light slatted through Venetian blinds. Working again from a literary source—Alberto Moravia's novel of the same title—Bertolucci presents his main character, Marcello (played to fastidious perfection by a tight-lipped Jean-Louis Trintignant), son of an insane father and a dope-addicted mother.

Marcello could be BEFORE THE REVOLUTION's Fabrizio ten years older and a quarter of a century earlier. Desperate to grab onto some vestige of normality, Marcello becomes engaged to a marvelously amoral bourgeois woman (acted with rapacious gusto by Stefania Sandrelli). When he goes to prenuptial confession he counts among his sins that of murder.

In flashback we see Marcello, a young boy in short pants on his way home from school, first being sexually humiliated by a group of schoolboys, then followed by a chauffeur in an imposing limousine. The chauffeur, Lino (Pierre Clementi), eventually coaxes the young Marcello into his car and drives him to his employer's mansion atop a landscaped hill high above the city. The two climb to Lino's attic room, play hide and seek among the drying laundry hanging from washlines stretched between the rafters (the scene is eerily reminiscent of the hero's death at the conclusion of Wajda's great ASHES AND DIAMONDS).

In Lino's tiny whitewashed room, the chauffeur first inexplicably produces a gun and then takes off his chauffeur's cap, his long black hair suddenly tumbling to his shoulders in a bizarre metamorphosis of the

image first presented by the young servant boy-girl in RIGOLETTO. Lino dons a kimono, murmuring softly to the boy, "Kill the butterfly. Kill the beautiful butterfly." He pulls Marcello onto the bed, strokes the boy's bare legs. Suddenly Marcello holds the gun, shoots the walls, the blue Madonna above the bed. Lino lies crumpled on the floor at the side of the bed, blood gushing from his head. Marcello runs away.

Twenty years later, the priest absolves the bridegroom Marcello, relieved to know no sexual act occurred with the chauffeur and more than eager to give absolution to someone as closely associated with the Fascist cause as Marcello.

Just as Fabrizio in BEFORE THE REVOLUTION intended to take his first love, Agostino, to see Professor Cesare and finally ended up taking his aunt, Gina, so does Marcello in THE CONFORMIST end up taking his bride to Paris, ostensibly to visit Professor Quatri, Marcello's philosophy teacher when Marcello was at university. (On the hilariously sexy honeymoon train from Rome to Paris, Marcello's bride graphically relates how she lost her virginity at the age of fifteen to an older man and then, turned on by her own confession, proceeds to seduce and mount the passive Marcello as the train roars into a tunnel.)

This visit to the professor has an ulterior motive: Marcello is to kill Professor Quatri, the anti-Fascist in exile, in order to prove his allegiance to the party and therefore his normality. Marcello and his wife find Quatri living in a Paris flat with a group of devoted young men and his wife, Anna (Dominique Sanda). Anna, at first a butch-lesbian caricature—striding about, hands thrust firmly in trouser pockets—quickly becomes the epicenter of repressed erotic desires in the film. Anna, alone of all the characters in the perhaps oversimplified Reichian schema of the film, is a free sexual agent, radiating a determined sensuality that at once frightens and fascinates Marcello.

It is not so much Anna whom Marcello comes to love but rather the sexual possibilities she represents, her triumphant lesbianism mirroring his cowering in the closets of respectable marriage and ultra-respectable Fascism. Become voyeur, he watches silently from a hotel corridor as Anna seduces his only somewhat reluctant wife, watches Anna master his wife through the paces of a steamy tango performed at a public dancehall, later attempts to kiss Anna but suddenly pulls back, his bitten lip streaming blood. Anna in many ways provides a (temporary) resolution to the question of whether homosexuality is decadent or subversive, for she is firmly gay and firmly allied with the anti-Fascist cause. Marcello too is *finally* subversive in that he betrays both ends of the political spectrum in his continuing attempt to appear normal

He sets up Anna's husband for murder, flatters the unbeguiled Professor Quatri, reminds him of his lecture on Plato's myth of the cave, expresses a desire to join the anti-Fascist cause. After describing the image of Plato's shadows flaming on the wall of the cave, Quatri throws open the windows of his study, letting the clear light stream in. Marcello seeks refuge in the room's remaining shadows.

This Socratic relation—older man teaching impressionable youth—runs in an ambiguous refrain from BEFORE THE REVOLUTION to THE CONFORMIST and gets intermingled with another strain—murder of the father by the son. At the end of BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, Fabrizio has rejected Professor Cesare, rejected Cesare's Marxism and his unusual, womanless life. In RIGOLETTO the son comes to find, investigate and kill the legend of his flamboyantly heroic father and ends taking his father's place, becoming what the son simultaneously wanted to love and reject. At the end of THE CONFORMIST Marcello arranges and assists in the murder of Professor Quatri, denies his teachings and his trust, refuses to accept the loving teacher-pupil father-son relationship proffered. He also allows the avoidable murder of Anna, watches as she's hunted down in a forest like some wild beautiful animal, and sees the obliteration of her disturbing sexuality.

In the odd epilogue to THE CONFORMIST, set the night of the fall of Mussolini, Marcello goes out into the streets of Rome to meet his Fascist mentor, a blind radio-propagandist. An interesting and chilling mirror image of Quatri and all his clear light, this blind man is a person whom Marcello always finds ensconced in shadows. And now Marcello completes the twin mirrors of his life by betraying and abandoning his blind sponsor to a rampaging vengeful Liberation mob.

This betrayal occurs because Marcello, while walking with the blind man, encounters Lino—the Madame Butterfly chauffeur he thought he had murdered as a schoolboy in that attic room—talking to a bare-chested young hustler. Letting his blind mentor be borne away by the crowd, Marcello returns to find the hustler. Our last glimpse of Marcello: the young hustler's naked back bends over the phonograph in his open-air quarters in a Roman ruin; he starts a pop Italian song and returns to his bed and the waiting Marcello.

LAST TANGO IN PARIS

In LAST TANGO IN PARIS, at a certain point Paul (Marlon Brando) has convinced the young Jeanne (Maria Schneider) that their sexual liaison should remain completely anonymous (no names), completely secret (Jeanne won't tell her fiancé, Paul seems to have no friends to tell), and circumscribed (by the walls of their apartment rented especially for the affair). It is at that point when Paul tells Jeanne, indicating the rooms of their empty apartment, "Everything outside this place is pure bullshit."

I think it was at this line that I realized, although I couldn't have exactly told you how or why, that everything *within* that place was bullshit too. At first, noting the camera showing us the name of the street—Rue Jules Verne—where Paul and Jeanne, both inspecting the same apartment for rent, meet and suddenly make love, I assumed the street sign was meant to indicate that Bertolucci was working out the prototypical heterosexual male fantasy—pure lusty fucks, no encumbering attachments. That this relationship ultimately failed, in fact proved fatal for Paul, seemed to indicate that Bertolucci was saying this sort of macho fantasy was over,

impossible (after all, Jeanne won in the end, dressing Paul in her father's military cap and gunning him down in a scene curiously, touchingly reminiscent of the final scene of Godard's *BREATHLESS*).

LAST TANGO didn't really begin to make sense to me until I came across Norman Mailer's piece, half broadside against Pauline Kael, half illuminating critique. (Kael, it should be noted, has done more to establish Bertolucci's reputation in North America than any other critic writing. She did, however, warn in a perceptively prophetic article on *THE CONFORMIST* that Bertolucci's obsession with style for style's sake could lead him to make "luscious fruity movies." What's peculiar is that she didn't recognize her prediction come true with *LAST TANGO*.) The essence of Mailer's criticism states that Bertolucci goes a certain daring distance with *LAST TANGO*—in allowing his actors to improvise, in his stylization of Paris, in his unexpected touches of the surreal and the grotesque—but the distance gone is just far enough to tip us off he hasn't made it all the way, has tried for personal and artistic autonomy, but has pulled up just short of his goal.

Add to Mailer's assessment Ingmar Bergman's unexpected but certainly revealing comment that *LAST TANGO* would have been a much more truthful film had the Jeanne/Maria Schneider role been played by a boy, and suddenly the subliminal fragmentary feel of the film melds into an explanation. Suddenly all the pieces that did not, would not, fit—why does Brando, a recent widower, need to keep his affair with Jeanne a secret? Why the anonymity, the hiding? What's the sense behind Jeanne and Paul, two adult heterosexuals, leading double lives? What purpose does it serve? Why the anal-intercourse-with-butter-lubricant scene? All these questions come rushing together to meet Bergman's answer.

As one academic critic has recently noted, Paul and Jeanne's apartment forms "a desperately narrowed world, reduced ... both spatially and temporally." The old closeted heterosexual routine. That two heterosexuals would want a secret affair is entirely plausible, but when the secrecy is extreme (no names), unwarranted—well, an absurdity envelops their closet. It's difficult to comprehend anyone choosing to perform a charade that isn't necessary.

LAST TANGO is to date Bertolucci's most commercial and least affecting film. After a history of delving into the ambiguities and possibilities of sexuality in his previous feature films, Bertolucci suddenly, inexplicably reverses his stand, moves from an oblique to a straight-on perspective. (In a *Rolling Stone* interview at the time of *LAST TANGO*'s release, he was much more eager to talk about his ongoing Freudian psychoanalysis than about the widespread rumors concerning his bisexuality.) But even the new psychoanalyzed Bertolucci can't resist one provocative image: One of the most effective scenes in *LAST TANGO* occurs when Paul, visiting the hotel his wife owned and managed before her suicide, meets his wife's lover. The two talk and drink whiskey in the lovers' room, dressed in identical red-plaid bathrobes, robes given to each by Paul's wife.

We feel the loss of oblique angles in LAST TANGO, experience the resulting flatness. LAST TANGO is a lush beautiful movie, a movie on the brink. Its only problem is it never leaps, never soars into the sensual space we sense Bertolucci, of all working directors, could master.

1900

It's impossible to include a definitive examination of gay themes and images in the new 1900 since it's impossible to see the film in North America. Prospective distributors mumble a great deal about length, and five hours and twenty minutes is long, but a source at Paramount (which recently waived distribution rights) told me the extremely political nature of the film was probably more to blame.

Originally and more aptly titled NOVECENTO (or TWENTIETH CENTURY or THE NINETEEN HUNDRED), 1900 takes up the twinning motif with a vengeance. Two children, one the son of an Italian landowner, the other the son of one of the landowner's sharecroppers, are born at the same time on the same day. The film presents them in systematic opposition as they grow up together and then apart. 1900 ends on April 25, 1945, Liberation Day, with the peasants briefly seizing control of the region where Olmo and Alfredo have grown up—the Emilia Romagna area that has been socialist ever since socialism, and communist ever since communism. Here the peasants become the film's true protagonists, abruptly severing plot's severe dual structure to celebrate jubilantly their victory over fascism and capitalism. Their joy is brief, however, for on the same day they are ordered by the Committee of National Liberation to surrender control. Bertolucci has called the film as a whole a Gramscian work that presents both "the optimism of the will and the pessimism of reason."

As a critic in *Positif* notes, for Bertolucci in 1900 the working class has become the embodiment of virility. In one early scene, Olmo (Gerard Depardieu), the sharecropper's son, and Alfredo (Robert De Niro), the landowner's son, compare penis size, and Olmo jokingly notes his is longer because he's a socialist.

Later, Alfredo, exempted from military service, is distraught over the fact that Olmo must go to war and may be killed. The night Olmo is to leave, Alfredo lies down on the railroad tracks and waits for the train that will bear Olmo off to war to pass over him.

But this examination of the obvious sexual aspects of the twinning motif is soon dropped as political concerns escalate, the *Positif* critic remarks; then it is reinstituted in a radically different context. The rise of fascism in Italy is represented by Attila (played by an eye-rolling Donald Sutherland), the provincial Fascist leader of the Emilia region. With Attila, fascism "becomes bad melodrama where the fascist becomes sexually unbalanced, bloodthirsty, one of his defects being a homosexual inclination for young boys that he rapes and kills." As Bertolucci makes clear in an interview in *Cineaste*, "Fascists in my movie haven't reached a mature sexuality and so they move in a totally sado-masochistic

universe."

Bertolucci goes on to say (to anyone's surprise?): "A Freudian influence is always present in my movies, not because I read Freud, but because I have been undergoing analysis for six years."

Has no one pointed out to Bertolucci that Freudian psychoanalysis is a whole bourgeois cosmology unto itself? He blithely and unquestioningly accepts its central premise that the only mature sexuality is heterosexuality. Does he also mean to indicate that if your sexuality is immature and homosexual, you are concomitantly a closet fascist? Hitler made the reverse charge—if you're queer, you're Bolshevik—and made his point by having nearly a quarter of a million homosexuals executed in Nazi death camps between 1937 and 1945. And how does all this reflect on Bertolucci's mentor, the late Pier Paolo Pasolini, a dedicated Marxist who many people feel was the victim of the Italian neo-fascist movement? I suppose in the Freudian arrangement of things it's still necessary to kill off the father figure, even if someone else has already done it for you.

At the same time as he unquestioningly accepts the Freudian premise that only heterosexuality is mature, Bertolucci, strangely enough, uses Freudian imagery—the old throw-yourself-in-front-of-a-moving-train image (a slight homosexual variation on the heterosexual train-enters-tunnel image in *THE CONFORMIST*)—to illustrate the binding love between two noble men, Olmo and Alfredo.

All the contradictions, the vacillations, the ambivalences running through his previous films seem to be accentuated, even horribly distorted, in *1900*—on the one hand two men of differing classes united by birth and love, on the other the monster-pervert fascist.

DANCE

The image of dance as a visual metaphor for life informs all of Bertolucci's films. In *THE GRIM REAPER* two teenage girls seek refuge from an afternoon rainstorm in the room of an older woman friend, and there they dance a loose joyous cha-cha to the rhythms of the radio and rain. The gay cruiser leads the police to the murderer—they find the murderer mingling with the dancers at an open-air dance-stand in the same park where he lured the prostitute to her death.

Easter Sunday, after the requisite and over-abundant noon meal, Fabrizio and his Aunt Gina, in what is the most intensely erotic moment in *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION*, move together in a slinky dance of illicit desire to the soaring banalities of an Italian pop song coming from the radio. For all its unanticipated carnality (they are, after all, just dancing, making love standing up to music), the scene also teeters back and forth between anti-bourgeois satire and unapologetic Oedipal clichés. Grandmother snores upright and open-mouthed in her chair, Grandfather unperturbedly scans the Sunday newspaper, Fabrizio and his aunt move tight into the clinch, Gina's adolescent son observes from

the salon door. Gina notices his stare of dawning comprehension and quickly corrects the situation, satisfying, one must note, more than one forbidden desire. Now she dances with the boy, holds him tightly to her breast as Fabrizio looks on. It's a splendid foreshadowing occurring early on; then it's only vaguely recalled in the film's final scene when, just after Fabrizio's wedding, Gina stands in front of the cathedral, arms wrapped tightly around her son, running her fingers back and through his fine dark hair, wets his shoulder with her copious tears.

A blend of eroticism and aggressive defiance attaches itself to the dance, which is apparent in *RIGOLETTO*, dance having moved from *THE GRIM REAPER*'s unselfconscious cha-cha to the almost motionless coupling of nephew and aunt, aunt and son in *BEFORE THE REVOLUTION*. The father-hero of *RIGOLETTO* reeks of bravado as anti-Fascist pretender (our impression of his swaggering admirable boldness stays even after we learn he's a double agent). Appearing at the local Fascist celebration, he strides into an open-sided pavilion, where dancers halt their hard-angled movement in anticipation of the Fascist anthem with its solo cornet. He abruptly takes possession of the nearest woman and waltzes her, thrusts her across the dance floor. I don't know if we respond more to the artifice in Bertolucci's brazenly theatrical set-pieces or to the humor and the daring of movie clichés unexpectedly transformed. The audacity in *RIGOLETTO* is as much Bertolucci's as the father-hero's.

Anna, the icon of unrepressed desires in *THE CONFORMIST*, teaches dance. It is Anna who parades Marcello's happily dissembling wife (to her new husband, to Catholic morality, to society itself) about the public dance hall. This scene is so erotically charged and giddily transparent that it reminds us of Marlene Dietrich in *MOROCCO*, dressed in her cabaret-act tuxedo, first courting and finally kissing a pretty woman in the audience as Gary Cooper looks stoically on. The two women tangoing in *THE CONFORMIST* provide what is surely the most affirmative (rather than merely easily defiant) image of dance in Bertolucci's work: Dominique Sanda, in a white gown that fairly steams like dry-ice, kneeling down, Jeanne d'Arc before the Dauphin, as Stefania Sandrelli circles her majestically, delightedly. This private tango quickly becomes a swirling chain of dancers, a gracefully seductive spider's web that encircles but does not include the non-dancing Marcello, the man who would be normal.

What has happened between *THE CONFORMIST* and *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* is difficult to fathom—the life-giving dance becomes, almost without warning, a danse macabre. Brando and Schneider (for here they go beyond being stars playing roles to roles revealing stars) stumble upon a tango contest. The participants are almost manikins, lacquered with impotency and decay. Brando hauls down his pants and moons this display of mock-passion, a gesture that is an uneasy blend of the father-hero's defiance in *RIGOLETTO* and Marcello's refusal to participate in the tango in *THE CONFORMIST*.

A surprising scatological preoccupation seems to have LAST TANGO in its grasp. Brando's bare-ass up-yours-to-the-elbow gesture to the dance of life is one of several visual and verbal equations of anal eroticism with death. Brando tells Schneider she must go "right up the ass of death, right up his ass until you find a womb of fear." And when he assfucks her, we are asked to view the act as humiliating and brutal. Not to mention the awesome tone that pervades the scene in which he solemnly bids her to trim two fingernails so she can stick those two fingers up *his* ass. (The very presentation of anal sexuality causes certain problems to arise—whether for the filmmaker or for the viewer. Anal intercourse, for instance, is probably generally more acceptable to gay males than it is to the heterosexual population. People who have not experienced anal intercourse or who have found the experience unpleasant rather than pleasurable frequently find it humiliating and in many ways akin to the act of rape. Certainly some heterosexual women see the act as both painful and degrading. Bertolucci's depiction of anal intercourse in LAST TANGO seems to enforce this view.)

The dance of life is found to be decadent and grotesque in LAST TANGO and should therefore be rejected. But it's the only dance there is. Rejecting it means death—Brando-Paul-Father staring incredulously at the gun Schneider-Jeanne-Daughter (or is it Son?) aims and fires. The dance of life may be threateningly carnal, but carnality must finally be redemptive. Paul in LAST TANGO can only join in the dance furtively and can only recreate his fantasy of anonymous passion-fucks in a secret apartment on rue Jules Verne.

The linking of homosexuality and death then emerges as a consistent theme. Agostino kills himself in BEFORE THE REVOLUTION, partly because of his unrequited love for Fabrizio. Marcello in THE CONFORMIST thinks he has killed the chauffeur who attempted to seduce him as a child but is haunted throughout the rest of his life by the combined image of homosexual seduction and death. In 1900, Alfredo's love for Olmo must inevitably become a fatal one, for sexual as well as political reasons. Alfredo seems to worship Olmo's peasant virility and his socialist cock, but Alfredo can only accept his longings for both symbolically-by lying down in front of Olmo's train. And the fascist Attila becomes the final gruesome expression of Bertolucci's sexual phantoms, phantoms that seem half fears, half desires. Attila becomes the ultimate equation-through his sodomizing and then killing of young boys—of homosexuality, decadence, anal intercourse, fascism and death.

What a long way Bertolucci and his films have come from the frightened but brave gay cruiser who becomes the hero of THE GRIM REAPER. What a long way from the tender love of Fabrizio for the boy with hair like canary feathers or from Anna and her triumphantly erotic lesbianism in THE CONFORMIST. We can speculate from the sudden self-important wails of existential despair in LAST TANGO IN PARIS—a quality entirely missing from THE CONFORMIST—that Bertolucci's spiritual and erotic malaise has its source in a director trying to express himself in terms of a passion he does not feel. And, in light of

Bertolucci's own comment stated at the beginning of this essay about *1900*, were led to wonder if it's only the critics who have been fucked up the ass but refused to come.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A dialogue on gays, straights, film, and the left

by Tom Waugh and Chuck Kleinhans

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The following dialogue condenses several letters exchanged between us during the evolution of this Special Section on "Gays and Film" and supplements it with excerpts from a taped discussion we had in Montreal in July. We thought it important to bring out some points the articles and reviews only briefly touched on in the Special Section.

TOM: (letter to Chuck, Feb. 1977) As you can see, and as I think I forewarned you, your suggested article on A VERY NATURAL THING has expanded considerably. I felt it would be apolitical to trash one gay film without semi-praising, or at least encouraging, two others at the same time. I also felt the four page introduction was an important part of the article even though it isn't about the films, for reasons you will see when you read it. If you like the film part and not the intro, we will have to talk about it. I'm particularly anxious to know if you think it sounds querulous, self-righteous, belligerent etc. ... The last issue looked great; the LIFEGUARD cover was a real turn-on. Real *Advocate* butch. I'm sure your sales skyrocketed.

CHUCK: (letter to Tom, Feb.) I'm sending your article around the editorial board, and we should have a decision in a month or so. It was terribly flattering to have your article come in with the introduction you wrote. Obviously you trust us, and that kind of comradely engagement is all too rare sometimes and something to treasure when it happens. I don't think the tone was wrong, though I can't speak for others on the ed. board. I think the intro sets the article and also is exactly the kind of ongoing process that JUMP CUT or any other decent political work has to be. We learn; we change.

In the area of general observations about the intro. I think that you single out Peter whereas I am at least as culpable. I thought about the particular headline of his article for a bit of time and changed my mind several times about printing it or not. I finally decided that the irony of the stereotypes was heavy enough to anyone who read the article to

make it clear Peter was critical of the stereotypes. That's not a justification (I agree with your criticisms) but an explanation. But, of course, the reader never knows what went on in the editor's head. In short, we would have, having made the mistake, been absolutely ready to print any (or any number of) outraged replies... That is, our consciousness was that high (though not high enough to avoid the mistaken headline to start with).

There is a certain vicious circle effect here. Even if you keep using little formulas like we do in a lot of our editorials and our advertising such as, "Jump Cut recognizes the struggles of workers, women, third world people, gays and lesbians," that still doesn't connect up with reality — people don't always realize that we're desperately trying to get material. But, why should a gay write for JC, which hasn't published anything by or on gays, etc.? So, the articles don't come in, so you don't print them, etc.. I think we're breaking through that now (though our track record on racism is a lot worse than on sexism... failure to consider it a priority, inertia, etc.).

I would make one criticism of your intro (though I don't mean by this that you should change it), which is that I think in pointing out that gay men are not by definition women haters, you avoid the problem that some are and that it is no more tolerable or justifiable than when found in straight men. Perhaps it's more noticeable (being less "natural" than routine sexism against women) by often being a ghettoized cultural expression of defensive responses to oppression. I have a hard time dealing with that when it pops up among men I know. Ageism is a similar thing in some parts of the gay culture that I'm critical of.

I talked with John Hess on the phone. Since we also have an article on the image of gays in film noir by Richard Dyer in England, we thought of printing the two articles together perhaps with the review you sent on of the Fassbinder film from *Gay Left*. What do you think of that? We could even make it a Special Section. Do you have any other leads on articles? ... Of course the real solution is to get all those gay left film people who haven't been writing to start sending us manuscripts. I'm thinking of keeping the Section to gay men. I don't like the idea of sticking in a lesbian writer just for the token value. And because lesbian criticism is very close to feminist criticism, it makes sense to separate gay male and female views, as individuals and organizations in fact have.

TOM: (letter) A possible section on gays and film is a great idea and I'll do anything I can to help out. Here are some possible articles and reprints. ...

I certainly agree that ageism and misogyny are no more tolerable in gay culture than in the dominant culture, and it's interesting that you find it more "noticeable" in gay culture for the reasons you mention. However, I still don't feel obligated to do a heavy mea culpa number about it for a straight public. I think these problematic elements in gay culture are simply echoes of the same thing, institutionalized and omnipresent, in the dominant culture, and unpoliticized gays can't be held accountable

for them any more than can blacks or other minorities. We have no choice since we live within a certain society but to use the cultural and political environment of that society as the raw material for our cultural expression. Until you can show me that BLUEBOY is demonstrably more sexist and ageist than PLAYBOY, I've got other things on my mind. In any case, thank you for your candor, your sensitivity, and your trust in return.

TAPE EXCERPTS

CHUCK: I'm enthusiastic about the Special Section because it's important for JC to get involved in developing gay criticism and fighting sexism within the left. As you point out in your article, some parts of the left have a totally reactionary attitude and dismiss or attack gays as "decadent." We have to struggle against that and fight for gay liberation as part of a total left perspective and program. Today you can't call yourself a leftist and not take into account the struggle against sexism by women's, lesbian, and gay liberation — just as you must deal with racism. Right now in the left, at least in the United States, there's a lot of liberalism in the left about gay issues. People will just pay lip service and say, "Yes, that's important," but not go any further. Hopefully the Special Section is a starting point for straight people to see what a gay film criticism is and see how they can incorporate it into their own criticism and teaching.

TOM: It's only in the last ten years that the left has reevaluated its attitude towards women. Similarly, until now, the left's attitude toward gays has reproduced the attitudes of the dominant institutions in the most retrogressive ways. For that reason, most gay leftists have more or less dissociated themselves from the left movement and worked only in the gay movement, often abandoning the left after years of scrapping and humiliation. Leftists at best often see the gay struggle as a civil rights struggle and nothing more, and they fail to see the connection between the oppression of gays and that of women and minorities and the working class.

CHUCK: It's often very hard for any of us to understand the systematic nature of our oppression. ... That it is understandable only as a system and not just as what happens to us as individuals. Both gay and straight men have to understand sexism, as a system of oppression, as part of patriarchal capitalist society, not just in terms of how it affects them psychologically or materially but also how it affects women. I'm critical of the film MEN'S LIVES (see review and interview, JC 10/11) for not making that connection. While it's very good at showing the surface level oppression of men, it never connects that to the operation of sexism within our whole capitalist culture. It fails to see that all men benefit from the oppression of women, whether they want to or not. We need to move to a much more comprehensive analysis and political action. Straight men have to be active in fighting in the interests of gay men; and both gay and straight men have to understand and fight against the oppression of women. And all of us have a stake in replacing

capitalism with socialism. Whatever our immediate priorities, we have to realize we're fighting a whole system of exploitation.

In examining my own attitudes, I realize that in the past few years I've tended to think of gays in terms of those who are able to live a relatively open gay lifestyle in several hip professional areas in Chicago. Because those men are "visible," I've tended to think of gay issues more in terms of lifestyle and also to assume that indeed there has been a gradual improvement in the situation — that gays are accepted, or at least tolerated. I remember saying that about a year ago to John Hess and he strongly disagreed. At the time he was teaching a course called "Men's Lives," learning a lot himself, and was more sensitive to gay oppression than I was. Now with the Anita Bryant campaign against gays, I've had to see that was a pretty superficial attitude. I was really wrong. The depth of the problem is more apparent. From what I've seen in Chicago, I think gays and straights who'd counted on gradual reform are rethinking their politics.

TOM: There was a lot of illusory "progress" in the early 70s. What really happened was not so much a liberalization of social attitudes, but an accelerated ghettoization of the gay community in large urban areas where there was a kind of anonymity and defense in numbers. These were ghettos with a definite economic and cultural vitality, which led to a false sense of well-being, a kind of complacency on the part of middle-class, unpoliticized gays. People failed to see that the gay community extended far beyond those ghettos and that the liberation of the ghetto was every bit as tenuous as the security of the closet. You're right that Bryant has really shown us how premature the euphoria of "ghetto liberation" really was.

Movies made in the atmosphere of so-called liberation might have shown us the same thing: that the new hip tolerance was really a new form of homophobia. I get the feeling that Hollywood and European filmmakers who openly and frankly portray gays really think they're liberated. It's as if the new frankness about rape in a film like LIPSTICK actually made that film a progressive one. Or as if the brazen effrontery it took to make all of the villains in THE DEEP black indicated a progressive attitude towards race. It's incredible how popular films like SCARECROW, SLAPSHOT, FUNNY LADY, CROSS OF IRON, THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH, etc., BARRY LYNDON, instead of being liberal in their use of gay characters, actually perpetuate the most vicious of stereotypes.

Look at SLAPSHOT. The movie comes across as hip, realistic, and liberal because of all the frank homophobic language in the script and the introduction of a sensitive lesbian character (actually an insidious stereotype — all she needed was to be satisfied in bed by Paul Newman). But the anti-gay language of the hockey players, which the scriptwriter probably thought would be taken ironically, as signs of macho sexual fear or whatever, actually caters to homophobia. Audiences lap it up. They think it's cute and original to be able to queerbait openly and

without guilt. When Paul Newman tells a widowed businesswoman that she better toughen up her preteen son or else she'll find him with a cock in his mouth, one of the oldest stereotypes in the book is confirmed and legitimized because it's said by hip, liberal Paul Newman.

CHUCK: I think there's a similar danger within the left, within JUMP CUT, that we'd run this Special Section on gays and then congratulate ourselves and in effect ghettoize gays by either stopping at that point or saying, "Well, now we have some people who will write about gay films and we'll run them from time to time," rather than really dealing with issues of sexism and gay struggles in all of our criticism. It would reproduce the way men have sometimes dealt with the women's movement, saying, "Well, we'll have a women's page," or letting women write feminist criticism and acting as if that absolves men from dealing with their own sexism or with sexism in the films they make, write about, or teach.

TOM: You're right that it's a dangerous kind of tokenism, but film culture hasn't even gotten to the stage of tokenism yet. There are all kinds of areas which should be impossible to discuss without dealing with the gay question. But it's never dealt with; it's politely ignored.

I'm not talking only of films like DOG DAY AFTERNOON, where the subject is obvious. But I mean those areas where a gay reference is obviously suppressed or visible just below the surface — male buddy films, for example, and most male action genres. I'm not saying such films have consciously touched on any truths about homosexual components of male-to-male relationships, but the fear of such truths is usually clearly articulated; those films show the repression of such truths, whatever the truths may be.

Another area where the gay question is a crucial one but is always suppressed is that whole stream of European cinema which expresses a kind of "decadent" or androgynous sensibility, regardless of whether it deals explicitly with gayness. I'm thinking of the Italians, of course — Fellini, Bertolucci, Visconti, Zeffirelli, Pasolini, but also of Fassbinder, Daniel Schmid, Losey, Ken Russell, Jansco, Roeg, etc., etc. ... Gayness is never raised in criticism of those films, leftist or otherwise. The fact, for example, that THE CONFORMIST is positing some vague and ambiguous connection between fascism and homosexuality is never interrogated in any criticism of Bertolucci that I've seen.

The erotic cinema and pornography are another area where the gay perspective is suppressed. I thought it was shocking when *Cineaste* ran their survey on "Pornography and the Left," that they invited comments from five or six "authorities" but it never occurred to them to ask an openly gay person for his or her opinion. Particularly since the gay pornography industry is such a huge one and pornography has had such a formative influence on gay culture, a progressive influence even, according to many people.

CHUCK: In what sense?

TOM: Before the days of an openly visible gay movement, the only way for many gay people to discover and explore their own homosexuality was through pornography. That's how they recognized certain things about themselves, about their own bodies, that there were other people out there like themselves, that they were not alone. ... It was so typical of leftist cultural attitudes for *Cineaste* to have this glaring omission in their "comprehensive" treatment of the issue of pornography. I think the feminist attitude to pornography is often quite different from the gay male one. That's something lesbians and gay men are usually aware of but avoid bringing up in the interest of unity.

With a few important exceptions, I think that gay men are almost always opposed to any form of censorship, because they remember what it was like in the closet. And they know that censorship will always be applied to their own legitimate cultural expression as soon as it's permitted anywhere. That's what's happening in New York right now: No sooner does the *New York Times* make its hypocritical, puritanical decision to refuse advertising for porno films than they take it upon themselves as well to decide what gay cultural manifestations are decent enough to be advertised in a family newspaper, refusing to run an ad for a gay theatrical piece called *Gulp* with no pornographic content whatsoever because somebody didn't like the title. It's the same with the Canadian government's decision to block the import of a gay sex manual while admitting a real flood of the comparable hetero manual, *The Joy of Sex*, or the U.S. prison system's refusal to allow gay prisoners to receive gay publications. The issue of censorship is far from closed.

CHUCK: Another aspect of the liberalism that I talked of before can manifest itself in straight men accepting gay men or gay film criticism but without learning what gay men have to say to them as men. I think straights can often be passive and smug about it. But they should become more active in learning about gay liberation. What do you think straight men should do, what should they read, to find out more, to become more active in coming to terms with their own sexism and fighting it?

TOM: Rather than telling straight men what they should or should not do, I think I'd rather say how important it is for gays within the left to come out and form a very visible and vocal presence within both the straight left and the unpoliticized gay movement. It's up to straight men to choose their own methods of self-criticism and activism. As for reading, here are some suggestions.

A SHORT READING LIST ON THE GAY (MALE) LIBERATION MOVEMENT AND THE LEFT

1. Books

- James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in*

- Germany*. New York: Arno Press, 1975;
- John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*. Times Change Press, 62 W. 14th St., NY NY 10011.

These are two pioneering, mutually complementary studies of the forebears of the gay liberation movement, both with a consistently materialist outlook. The latter contains material from Britain and the Soviet Union as well as Germany.

- Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: Crowell, 1976.

A staggering documentary record of 410 years of oppression — and of resistance and love. Refreshing for its non-academic approach, and particularly interesting in its probing of the socialist roots of the early American gay movement during the McCarthy era.

2. Pamphlets

- Don Milligan, *The Politics of Homosexuality*. Pluto Press, Unit 10, Spencer Court, 7 Chalcot Road, London NW1 8LH, 1973.

A useful work suggesting how the oppression of gays supports the system and proposing some remedies.

- Bob McCubbin, *The Gay Question*. World View Publications, 46 U. 21st St., NY, NY.

A good introduction for straight leftists, published by Youth Against War and Fascism. Starts with Engels.

- David Thorstad, *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from Discussions Inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970-1973)*.

Selected, introduced, and with commentary by Thorstad, ex-member of the SWP (he resigns in disgust at the end of the chronology represented by the documents) and guiding light of the Gay Activists' Alliance, New York City. Available from 316 E. 11th St., NY, NY.

- *The Political Perspective of the Lavender and Red Union*.

A manifesto and analysis by this active group which has recently reconsidered its exclusively gay orientation. If not still available from the Lavender and Red Union, 6618 Sunset Blvd., LA 90028, your local gay bookstore might still have it in stock.

- *Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question*. The Los Angeles Research Group, PO Box 1362, Cudahy, CA 90201.

A group of lesbian communists (or communist lesbians?) proposing a provocative analysis of homophobia on the left.

- "A Conference Report: Faggots and Class Struggle."

A special issue of *Morning Due: A Journal of Men Against Sexism*, 2:6 (Nov.-Dec. 1976). P.O. Box 22228, Seattle, WA 98122.

- Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis*. London, Pluto Press.

An interesting study of two pioneer sexual liberationists of turn-of-the century England, one gay and the other possibly.

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TV's *Medical Center* sells sexual self-determination

by Sheila Wawanash

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In a two-part program that first ran about a year ago, [\(1\)](#) MEDICAL CENTER presented the delicate and controversial issue of transsexuality, an indication of the media's response to "relevance" and of the self-conceived role of prime time genres like the doctor show. According to David Boroff, such TV drama, which is in the general class of the "problem play," derives from

"a long and honorable literary tradition—that of middle class domestic drama... Theater has largely abandoned that large middle area of common experience which was its metier. TV, on the other hand, has become almost doggedly homiletic... The burden of teaching Americans how to live was assumed by the regular series, which week after week relentlessly tackled the domestic problems that beset Americans." [\(2\)](#)

Domestic problems have changed rather drastically since Boroff made these remarks in 1966. The content of the program in question challenges the codes and mores of sexual ideologies and even such an institution as domesticity itself, though not quite in the manner that "deviants" have done in actual social relations. The television treatment still presents its didactic thesis in terms that are acceptable to the dominant culture which comprises both its own milieu and that of its constituency. In spite of the potentially radical nature of its subject, MEDICAL CENTER gets little further than we might have anticipated — which is to say, squarely situated in the ethos of progressive liberal values, reinforcing sexual roles and expectations in a way that raises some fairly obvious questions and provides some equally obvious answers.

After watching the first hour, I was rather more uneasy than the experience seemed to warrant. I began to interrogate and to anticipate. A number of issues that seemed peripheral began to seem significant.

Though I wouldn't go so far as to say that the overt content proved to be a red herring, I came to the conclusion that there was another related level here of meaning in the presentation of that overt content. Flow I think that this level may be more socially and culturally important because it addresses a more common set of preoccupations and rests in an even more pervasive set of contradictions than does the issue of transsexuality.

In teaching English to foreign students, we call English the "target" language; we acknowledge that we are also teaching cultural contexts and assumptions that must be related, by degrees of identity and difference, to those of our students. Both the term and the concept are applicable to the case of this TV program, insofar as the "target" language revolves around the motivations of, and attitudes towards, a transsexual. But another character is also a target in this instance, and another set of social relations would seem to require a specifically ideological elaboration in interpreting the program's meaning. This character is a professional woman, unmarried but sexually involved with at least one man. And I propose to look closely at the language that articulates her role, and particularly at the extent to which *her* role is an unconfessed determinant in the underlying logic of the argument and its representation.

I want to reconstitute the "message" of the program, starting with a premise and a conclusion. My premise is that overt content does not *in itself* constitute "meaning," however zealously a well-intended theme might be pursued on the level of didactic intent. (3) In one sense, my analysis simply bears out Philip Elliot's proposition, "What is said is the unplanned product of following accepted production routines within established organizational systems." (4) One aspect of the media's "organizational system" (and, not so incidentally, a hospital's as well) is the dominance of men in positions of power. Thus it would seem an inevitable consummation, however devoutly we might not wish it, that this program speaks with a forked tongue if not a double standard with regard to the entry of women into the boardrooms of professional activity.

Between the program's premise and the conclusion as I have stated it here, there is a shift in "topics" that corresponds to a shift between our paying attention to two different characters in the drama, the transsexual and the woman doctor. This is precisely what I first vaguely felt that the program was doing. When I examined certain features of the narrative and its mode of representation, however, the pattern took a definite shape and confirmed my sense of how such a shift is actually effected. The project of analyzing this shift also led me towards a more workable understanding of such terms as code, combination, redundancy, and overdetermination, if only because I had to work with them to specify the program's way of speaking. Something more than the thrill of detective work and confirming suspicions, or of situating myself within the current terminological and theoretical arenas, provided me with a motive for presenting the results of my analysis.

Roger Silverstone has suggested that of all the popular media, TV is the most ideological in that it proceeds on the assumption that it "defines the boundaries of common sense from within its cultural centrality." (5) However, we can refuse to be passive about such "common sense" and "cultural centrality." Critical "readings" of popular TV and film productions have an end that is not simply personal or cultural introspection. Pam Cook has commented on the radical potential in carefully examining "trash" like exploitation movies:

"The overt manipulation of stereotypes allows us to see what language is at work; myths are revealed as ideological structures embedded in form itself ... Insofar as any stereotype represents the attempt to produce a universal popular language, equally valid for everyone, it is a political fact, and the desire to struggle with it marks the wish to change from the old to the new: to subject the timeless 'Truth' to the process of history. If we attempt to deny the reality of the stereotype, to bypass the forms of the language of the dominant class, we place ourselves outside the historical struggle, in the realms of the ideal world of narcissistic identification." (6)

While the exploitation genre uses the conventions of a conservative and generally "sexist" ideology, a TV series like MEDICAL CENTER inverts a good deal of the formula in its emphasis on liberal and progressive values. It is more difficult but I think no less crucial that we criticize such a liberal genre, but neither of these generic formulae or "languages" can be adequately dealt with and dismissed as producing the simple homologies of "false consciousness." Fredric Jameson has remarked that "the presence of some Utopian content even within the most degraded and degrading type of commercial product" provides clues as to how we might deal with such products as cultural facts and ideological phenomena. (7) What he is suggesting is that a radical demystification of mass culture's "pseudo-gratifications" is itself powerless unless it recognizes the social reality of the sources and tensions that give rise to collective fantasy. Both Jameson and Cook are defining the same problematic, but it is displaced and heightened in my project. In a "liberal" TV program we deal with a production that is neither directly exploitative nor degraded, (8) so that one of the first effects is that the critic's posture of rather easy superiority is denied us. More interesting and provocative proofs often reside in the more complex puddings, however. More than one "language" is at work in this program, and one of them is a more or less secretive one in the dynamics of sexual representation. The covert manipulation of sexual stereotypes, beyond the program's overt challenge to our attitudes towards a "deviant," demands an even more rigorous analysis if we are to distinguish what constitutes the program's political facts, its Utopian contents, and its ideological bias.

An element of socio-historical evolution might be discovered in the very titles of the doctor show format. The older series — BEN CASEY, DR.

KILDARE — concentrated on their stars, and much of the dramatic impetus was provided by a conventional interaction between an avuncular controlling figure (an older doctor or the head of the hospital, the police commissioner, the principal of the school) and the more impetuous young professional. The formula that absorbs the challenges to vested authority is not discontinued, but it does shift as we move through THE INTERNS and the provocatively titled DOCTORS AND NURSES, which finally admits women but only to assign them their secondary role in the professional hierarchy. In MEDICAL CENTER, the profession, the workspace, and the collectivity are designated as the primary focus, with the result that a fundamental (though unequal) dialectic emerges between the individual and the institution that functionally defines him *or* her. There is a paradigmatic split in the conception of character into the "public" or professional and "private" selves, which is also seen in the production values. Guest stars are as prominently featured as the regulars, and the drama is not confined to the hospital itself. (9)

This particular episode opens on a domestic scene, as Joe Gannon (regular) and Jessica (guest star) sit around his apartment in bathrobes and discuss their past and present feelings about one another. They are resuming an old affair, and this obviously heterosexual encounter is complicated by the fact that it is also a professional relationship. The lovers are both doctors, and the mobility of her position had enabled Jessica to run away from the relationship after its initial phase. Oddly, there is no suggestion that her moving to another city might have been imposed by her profession, which interpretation would be more accurate in light of the difficulties that couples generally encounter when the ambitions of two professionals require accommodation.

The next morning, Joe, now situated in his office, meets with Pat, who is an old male friend and a former associate at Medical Center. Except for the difference in their sex, Pat's introduction to us in several respects parallels Jessica's. Joe remarks that Pat looks "thinner." Pat amends this to "softer" and reveals his decision to seek "sexual reassignment." He states that he has already completed the hormone phase and wants Joe's help so the surgery can be performed at Medical Center. A terminology so inoffensive and hygienically medical also strikes a specifically TV note. Nothing so blatant or threatening as a sex *change* is suggested. Rather these words imply that the entire project of transforming sexual roles is a kind of Mission Impossible. Unhappy as a man, Pat wants desperately to try again as a woman. Even his name seems to be chosen for its androgynous potential; such choices are relatively important in a medium weighted rather heavily on the side of its soundtrack and verbal content. Pat says he loathes himself. Yet he chooses the sex whose self-loathing and powerlessness and desperation have been historically enforced by the very patriarchal prerogatives, especially embodied in the medical (and media) establishment(s), which he must confront and persuade before he can "escape."

Pat seems to imagine that becoming a woman would ratify his implicit

idealization of the female sexual role. Neither he nor the narrative suggests that there might be more to being female. The narrative gives no more thought to the role of socialization than to the possibility of doctors' giving up their professional prerogatives, and the whole question of the extent to which biology has justified women's oppression as much as their idealization is significantly begged by its absence. Appropriating biology as the major determinant of sex roles would, however, give audiences a way to accept Pat's position in this encounter. The dramatic details do suggest that the situation is something other than an irresolvable subjective dilemma, but they do not suggest that a solution might indeed be to transform sex roles.

What Pat wants is simply to transfer from one side of the great divide to the other. Pat's hormone-induced "femininity" is manifested by his touching breakdown, his tears and the assertion that he's "never wanted anything so much," and his manipulation of his friend's emotional and professional attachments in the interests of his goal. It's a challenging part for an actor and a significant dramatic conception. Pat's claims are recorded with eerie persuasiveness as the deeply resonant male voice intones the passionate — that is, extra-rational and thus female — conviction. Since this voice is, moreover, familiar to the TV audience as that of the representative father of *THE BRADY BUNCH*, the expression of the wish here underlines its departure from the norm. Wavy hair and "sensitive" eyes, faint tremors in the voice and coyly lowered lids, the fleeting smiles and tears — all of the gestures that denote the "feminine" are amplified by a calculated distance in the close ups and by such a characteristic physical attitude as that in which Pat is seen cowering slightly in his chair, shoulders rounded, looking as though he expects his fully male colleague and friend to hit him.

Joe, in contrast, is shown as mobile, walking around Pat's chair and the room. His first reaction is anger. He turns away from Pat and is framed in a window. Movement and an isolation that is concomitant with the use of visual framing here act as dominant subcodes throughout the two episodes (we might recall Ford's use of them in *THE SEARCHERS*, where they are also attached to a sexually based system of significance), and they specify reactions of anger, amazement, and aversion in the first of the two hours, inverted to acceptance in the second.

Yet another element is sketchily suggested here. Pat virtually flinches from a blow that is not, at least not physically, administered. Variations and inversions on a subcode of touch become a principal means of designation, and all these elements are featured in the series of confrontations that make up the dramatic whole. Pat has a wife, a son, and a sister-in-law (Jessica). After Jessica is told about the situation by Joe, she immediately rushes to a door where she stands, framed, while she explains that Heather (Pat's wife and her sister) will need her. When Pat informs Heather, Heather backs out of her chair and runs upstairs as Jessica comes in the front door.

Steve, the son, overhears Heather and Jessica talking in the garden, and

seeks out his father with a demand for a yes or no answer to what he thinks is an incredible situation. When Steve gets what he came for, he flings open the door by which he had just entered. Yelling "Freak!," Steve leaves Pat standing helpless in the open frame, unable to pursue his son as curious bystanders block his path. In every case, Pat's attempts to embrace those he loves and to explain his decision are literally shrugged off. Even Joe becomes untouchable merely through association with Pat, and for being "on his side," as Jessica puts it. Thus not only the marriage between Pat and Heather — that had been interrupted by Pat's two years in South Africa(!) — but the heterosexual relationship that has just been resumed between Joe and Jessica are jeopardized.

A single dramatic motif, disclosure of Pat's decision and people's reaction to it, makes up the major part of the first episode's narration. The decision challenges fixed roles and — with qualifications — sexual stereotypes. But the way the characters' response is portrayed reinforces the sense that those to whom the challenge is addressed are locked into sexual-political stereotypes, which go unchallenged. Even the challenger, Pat, is depicted in terms of a stock set of "feminine" gestures. Such notions and depictions of femininity are at the core (if they are not the cause) of double-bind situations and responses in which members of the audience as well as characters in the drama participate. Deviancy is linked with untouchability and isolation; in the drama, deviancy impels the movements of the other characters who back off from the situation in various ways.

Yet the audience is clearly meant to sympathize with the dilemma of the protagonist and to hope for an adequate resolution. The parameters of the problem can be seen in the use to which the strongest source of values in the show, its regular Joe Gannon, puts stereotypical notions as he faces the necessity of informing others. When he tells his chief, Joe notes that Pat never contributed to locker-room banter — "You, know, who did what to whom" — and thus Joe grounds his persuasive technique in stereotypes. And Pat himself calls upon essential femininity to explain to his wife that he understands her and her pain only too well and that she and the family might have known about him all along because he had always needed time for introspection and "little chats" about their relationship.

The richest locus of contradictions, however, lies in institutional politics. A board of directors, upon which both Joe and Jessica sit, must make a collective decision about Pat. Although neither the board nor Pat want any publicity, the courage of one's convictions was one of the values that gave rise to the situation in the first place. In that both shun the threat of publicity, Pat's claims and those of the institution coincide. When Pat's state of mind and the irreversible nature of his chosen course of action are also broached, the board cannot even imagine any way to work out an active and actual equation of individual and institutional interests. Instead, the directors demonstrate "the first rule of politics: get the heat off yourself." (10) They pass the buck to Joe, making him

fully responsible; they consent only to testing Pat's overall health. They enter into no real risks, and they (and we) are obviously prepared for the kind of *deus ex machina* peculiar to TV in general and the doctor show in particular when difficult social questions are at stake. When the tests reveal a coronary condition, the palpable relief of all concerned is indicated by a slight break in the indirect code of untouchability: Joe and Jessica, who have been continuing the quarrel they began in the committee meeting, suddenly take each other's hand as their chief informs them of the results.

The last segment of this episode partially inverts the dramatic formula. For one thing, Pat must learn the results of a decision-making process upon which he is dependent, much as others have been seen as dependent on his own decisions (this especially applies to Heather). After finding out, Pat himself enforces his isolation, since he asks Joe to leave. And, placed in a relation to his own dilemma that corresponds more to that in which he had earlier placed others, he now carries out the logic of consequent movement, seen in a highly conventional montage sequence, which also performs the summary and cliff-hanging functions required by the dramatic juncture. Pat is driving his car; the sequence is made up of close ups (his overwrought face, a foot moving from the breaks to the gas pedal), flash backs of traumatic moments, and mid-shots of two near accidents. A kind of private "chase" in narrative time as well as space, the sequence ends with the car going through a restraining barrier into a body of water. The episode ends with Pat in the hospital, Joe's patient after all.

When Joe questions him, Pat says that he was not attempting suicide but that it's an attractive idea since he's "spiritually dead" anyway, presumably because he now considers himself doomed to biological maleness. Both the extent to which he enacts the dramatic correlatives that have defined the responses of the "normal" characters, and his presentation in the next episode (he is more mobile and less made up, he even seems taller) would seem to lead into this non-resolution; but as Joe and his superior walk away (Are they always hanging around for mere car accidents?), Joe announces that he wants to go ahead with Pat's surgery, while his chief reminds him that the difficulties are now doubled, both in terms of Pat's condition and the necessity of persuading the other directors. Finally, we are left with the previews to next week's conclusion, which extend this set of contradictions. We see Pat slap his son's face twice for calling him "mother" — surely this flash of male aggression might announce his "recovery" — but we don't see the viewer's real object of desire in the voyeurist sense (will she or won't he), a shot of Pat after the operation.

The subcodes I've mentioned narratively reinforce the notion that deviancy enforces isolation, given the nature of our socio-cultural sexual politics. Furthermore, certain characters are linked with one another to constitute a collectivity of "normal" responses that must be reoriented if the self-determining individual is to be permitted to act (the question of Pat's reinstatement in the social complex is not significantly raised).

Three characters in particular must receive Joe's and Pat's didactic lesson in liberal tolerance, and there are narrative strategies that ensure their combination and utility as, in effect, audience surrogates. Television, of course, is a medium uniquely framed and embedded, both in the viewing situation and in its cultural content. We watch images of work and play, "adventure" and "home life," surrounded by the circumstances of our own lives and homes.

With the exception of four sequences, this first hour is confined to the hospital and Pat's hotel room, somewhat deflecting the potential threat to the audience in their own environment. The only two sequences in which Heather figures take place in her house and garden, and they seem to make her belong "naturally" to these settings at the same time as they activate a sympathy that is withdrawn elsewhere. In the second hour, when we no longer see her in this "natural" milieu, she is diagnosed by Joe as a neurotic. As Pat's wife, she is the character most directly involved in his decision. She is also the one least able to evade it in any real or productive sense, since her range of movement is restricted to the boundaries of her property (which probably doesn't belong to her anyway). Steve, the son, is as directly involved; the second episode shows him in "natural" settings that parallel, but in a wider range, those in which we initially see Heather. We see him by the sea, talking to Joe in a didactic interchange that clears up certain confusions; here the two characters go through a virtual litany of deviant terminologies — "Is he someone who...?", "That's a..." (we could call this the "situation method" of teaching deviancy as a second language, since the audience is clearly expected to benefit from the call and response drill pattern). We also see Steve in a more complex confrontation with Pat, in a mountain cabin where they had shared masculine pleasures in the past.

But Steve and Heather are balanced by a third character who is directly involved in a different sense. Skip Daley is a racing driver whose leg has been badly damaged in an accident, and whose best hope of recovery lies in Pat's professional expertise. Both his name and his occupation indicate his normal manly and social mobility. (In fact, there is the kind of redundancy we might note in the conjunction of Heather's name and the shots of her carrying flowers and sitting in her garden.) He is overtly "masculine" in his heavy-handed flirtation with a young nurse, and it is through Skip that the code of touchability is brought into the open, and through whom we can begin to discover its relation to sex role categories. He doesn't want Pat anywhere near him when he finds out about Pat's deviancy. But at that point Skip becomes untouchable himself; the nurse who has been giving him "her first bath" reads him the expected lecture on a broad mind and the separation of personal and professional factors and leaves him to finish washing himself. (11) Some of the double binds in the notions of male/female, deviant and normal, can be seen in the fact that intolerance produces the same set of relations as deviancy itself, even though it is defined as the normal response to deviancy.

And while Skip is actually outside the situation in which Heather and Steve find themselves, he is in some ways at the center of the sexual-political problem that divides the family across the gap of sex and age affiliations while it unites them in the family nexus. He is at least temporarily immobilized and, like Heather, dependent on the medical establishment in general and Pat in particular. But because he identifies so totally with male stereotypes he is, like Steve, threatened by the very idea of deviation from the male norm. Since he most clearly needs the program's didactic lesson, he could be seen as the most obvious audience surrogate. Yet he is the one *least* likely to be identified as such, and in effect we are placed in a relation that is about equidistant between Pat's values (that is, those of the "deviant" on one side and the "feminine" on the other) and Skip's (which are those of the "masculine" norm). Rather, it is Heather and Steve with whom we "identify." The linkage among the three characters groups them, however, and though there are distinctions and degrees in the manipulations of our sympathies, there are sufficiently repetitive effects between each of them that ensures that we will respond to them as a group. (For example, all of these characters, and only these characters, are blonde; we need hardly discount as an accident what acts as an overdetermination.)

The second hour repeats several of the basic situations of the first (a committee meeting, confrontations between Pat and Heather and Pat and Steve) and displaces others. There is the meeting between Joe and Steve in which Joe assumes a share of the paternal function and Steve is placed in settings and interpersonal relationships that parallel Heather's in the first hour. Heather, on the other hand, is virtually relegated to the margins of the drama, with both her role and Jessica's reduced to something like frame narratives. In effect, as the role of the women recedes, the complexities introduced into the Oedipal patrimony emerge as the foreground. The people who are to be didactically manipulated and reassured become principally male. While it's hardly an issue to be flippant about, one feature of the implied lesson now sounds like the traditional myth of male camaraderie; "We can solve this little problem amongst ourselves as long as women know their place and keep it." Of course, this variation on the absolute division into sex roles can hardly resolve the contradictions of Pat's situation. Accordingly, the key of the episode is struck in its opening note in an interchange between Pat and Skip on the subject of virility. Pat asserts that self-pity and gender identification are "all in your head," which would seem to contradict the passion with which he pursues a body that fits his conception of himself. But Skip is shown as learning the lesson immediately, for in the follow-up scene he violates a stereotype by becoming a "grown man in tears" who is able to reach for his young nurse's hand. The signifying gesture of withdrawal in the first episode is thus picked up and its inversion begun.

Concomitantly, if isolation and individual interactions had been the primary emphasis in the first episode, the social dimensions of the issue constitute the dynamics of the second. The three main scenes with Steve are motivated by another board meeting, in which Joe speaks of the need for sympathy in the individual case but also addresses the question

of social responsibility and professional example: "We are doctors. If we can't feel compassion who can?" Jessica responds that there is more than one person's "psychological health" at stake. In holding Joe to the premises of compassion and social responsibility, she extends and partially displaces his argument. When she presents the family as an institution that must also be considered, if not protected, the board finds itself in essential agreement with her position (and with its own tendency to delay and conserve). Once more the board makes Joe responsible, and this time he must obtain the family's cooperation if the surgery is to be performed or even reconsidered.

Heather won't see or talk to anyone, though she appeared briefly at the hospital in an opening scene, "pleading like an idiot" with Pat, to put it in her own words. Joe diagnoses her as "neurotic," which leaves the decision to operate up to Steve. First Joe attempts to clear up Steve's confusion as to just what his father is and wants; in particular, Joe explains terms like homosexual, transvestite, and transsexual. Next Steve overhears some of the Medical Center staff. They are making some rather lame and vulgar jokes about Pat, of the "You wouldn't know to look at him, he's six feet tall" and "Maybe they can make two women out of him" variety. They might be orderlies and thus outside the dominant "class" of the medical hierarchy, or they might be interns, which would demonstrate the need for ideological reorientation in the younger generation of which Steve is also a member. Steve, smaller than any of this male group and alone (which is visually punctuated by the contrast between his civilian clothes and their hospital whites), charges into the gathering. His act establishes both his own foolhardy masculinity" and the negative — i.e., aggressive — variant of the code of male-to-male approachability.

The same combination is instrumental in the subsequent confrontation between Steve and Pat at the mountain cabin to which Steve retreats after his futile attempt to defend not his father but his own right to participate in the male social unit. At this point, Steve's defensiveness is revealed as a function of his own insecure gender identification. He's "not good at sports" and "reads a lot — poetry." In short, since he's afraid that his sexual patrimony is an inherited defect, he had resolved to kill himself. That he's only managed to get drunk on a six pack is a final ignominy. Pat's reassurance — "You're not like me" (delivery heartfelt, near tears for the only time in this episode) — is not enough and may even provoke Steve into goading him with the difficult and, given the situation, insoluble Oedipal dilemma. When Steve says, "You're not my *father*! Maybe you're my mother. Maybe I have two mothers" — Pat responds by slapping him — twice, and deliberately.

This scene is actually the first half of a double dramatic movement. Its reversal is delayed by a scene between Heather and Joe. Joe assures her that what had passed between Pat and Steve had been more than a "proof of love." Though this remains to Heather — and by extension to us — something of a mystification, it presumably implies that Pat has demonstrated that he might abstract himself as an individual from the

fundamental determinant of his role as a father, but that the role itself is not thereby invalidated. By the next day anyway Steve has changed his mind about not giving his consent and seeks out his father in a scene that inverts both the confrontation in the first episode and the one we have just witnessed. Heather will go only so far as not to stand in Pat's way, but Steve has made a real and difficult commitment to the values of tolerance and the rights of individual self-determination. He acknowledges that his father must "do what you have to do," and they embrace over Pat's open suitcase in an eleventh hour reprieve, as Pat had been packing to leave Medical Center and seek the operation in a less scrupulous — and less safe — place.

Only when this continuity and communality of male roles and values is to some extent resolved does the conventional doctor-show operation take place, with the full quota of busy backs, masked and inscrutable faces, clipped, tense dialogue, and the expressive oscillations of the EKG machines. When the graph levels out, the anticipated *deus ex machina* seems to have arrived; surely we have been led to expect a death both because of the cardiac problem and because of the extraordinary nature of what must take place in the camera's eye if Pat does not die here. But TV series and medicine seem to have made a great deal of progress from the old days of high drama and easy non-resolutions to facing potentially troubling social facts and effects. The emergency is handled with such quick competence that the operation is over before we are aware that our expectations have been averted. And after a short interlude in which Joe prepares Heather for an encounter with a "fully feminine" Pat — which is articulated, beyond the facts of the operation, by the change to women's "clothes, hair, makeup — the unexpected does take place, more or less in plain view.

We watch Heather as she hovers anxiously in front of a closed door marked No Visitors (our own sense of suspense and voyeurist invasion heightened) and at the last minute removes her wedding ring. She opens the door; the camera adopts a "point of view" angle as we occupy her range of vision and, from a discreet distance, perceive a shadowy figure sitting in profile across the room. As she (Heather) apologizes for staring, Pat's voice offers a joking reminder that she (Pat) is going to start charging admission — which indicates that the most threatening change might lie in the need to use a different pronoun for Pat than the one we have been accustomed to. The camera approaches with Heather, and takes upon itself the courage of diegetic completion as well as the risk of being responsible for the voyeurist motive by actually showing its objective. Of course, Pat looks exactly like he did before the operation, but with a wig and makeup added (and he sounds exactly like he has all along, in a medium that is, as I have already observed, heavily determined in the direction of its soundtrack), but at least he doesn't look like anything on THE BRADY BUNCH.

And by carrying out the logistics of the code of sexual distance and approachability, the camera produces an effect of closure in this relationship that the characters themselves cannot. Pat and Heather

make no physical contact; they are brought together more by the medium's ability to place them in the same frame than by any possible resolution of their past differences and future similarities. In one sense, they come together as two newly self-determining individuals, since Heather has found a job and rather pathetically projects an image of recently won self-respect. This self-respect is qualified, however, even literally parenthesized, by Heather's abrupt dropping of the smiling mask of labored goodwill once she is outside Pat's ambience before and after this meeting; alone, she still looks anxious and tense, as if she's barely holding on. In another sense, both Pat and Heather must now learn to cope with the actuality that separates them in their new lives.

As Heather leaves alone, the camera lingers on her baffled face as she closes the door behind her. The final shot repeats the exit motif for Pat, but from a distance that both reaffirms the code by which he has been represented heretofore, and takes us back full circle to the credit sequence in which an ambulance, shot from above, approaches Medical Center. The "point of view" in this angle is that of the doctors' offices. In this case it is Joe's office, where he and his chief are discussing Pat's future — "She can handle it" — as she leaves by a side door to avoid the press and takes a taxi "to practice medicine in another country."

In context and presentation, this program is a genuinely progressive text. But to say this is not to imply an automatic value judgment, either positive or negative. We might well consider at this point Colin McCabe's observation:

"The classic realist text cannot deal with the real in its contradictions ... There is a level of contradiction into which it can enter. This is the contradiction between the dominant discourse of the text and the dominant ideological discourses of the time. The contradiction between the dominant discourses in a classic realist text and the dominant ideological discourses at work in a society are what provide the criteria for discriminating within the classic realist text. And these criteria will often resolve themselves into questions of subject matter. What is, however, still impossible for the classic realist text is to offer any perspectives for struggle due to the inability to investigate contradictions."[\(12\)](#)

Continued on [page two](#) of essay.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

TV's Medical Center (cont'd)

McCabe constructs at least one monolith — the classic realist text — whose existence and functional dimensions might be questioned. That it is the scapegoat required by his argument is its clearest feature, as is the valorization of another implied monolith, the revolutionary as opposed to the merely progressive text. However, the argument is heuristically justified here, insofar as these episodes of MEDICAL CENTER are indeed progressive precisely in terms of subject matter and entirely beg such questions as the role of social conditioning in both the reality and the self-image of a female, whether she was born that way or chose to become a member of the weaker sex. Most importantly, in the complexities that attend Jessica's role in the representation, most of the unexamined regressions and contradictions seem to reside.

Two features of the presentation reflect and recast the narrative content, which apparently engages the problem of sex-role typologies and the possibilities of transforming them. These are the dynamics of the two-couple situation and the characterization of Jessica. All of the four main adult characters are bonded to each of the others and defined in relation to both heterosexual and single-sex relationships. Both heterosexual pairings are jeopardized by Pat's circumstances. Heather's role and concept of herself is directly threatened, since she's been unable to do much with herself in the two years of waiting for her man's return. As she puts it, she's been "rattling around" her empty house, "going crazy." Jessica's literal sisterhood and solidarity are no real help to her, and she suggests that Jessica might do better to work out the implications in the relationship with Joe.

In fact, Jessica's presence only intensifies Heather's sense of a double failure. Their doctor father had only brought home his quiet intern (Pat) when others had "passed her by" and it had become clear that she would not enter the medical profession herself, as Jessica had done. But of course Heather's marriage is now also revealed as a failed unit in the system of patriarchal exchange. She feels in some measure responsible; she's "not the kind of woman that turns men on — not that kind." So Jessica's supportive claim that Heather's decision to marry and have children was an honorable one is not much help. Anyway, Jessica has poise, confidence, an income, and a virile doctor who wants to marry her, while Heather has nervous mannerisms and lines in her face from all that waiting around — for Pat and also for Jessica.

The outlines of an alternate route begin to emerge in Jessica's choice of

direct entry into the medical profession, but this choice also defines itself in relation to the system of patriarchal exchange, on one hand, and as a disruption of her sisterhood, on the other. Heather and Jessica are both adamantly opposed to Pat's decision and do everything in their power (which isn't much) to prevent his plan's fruition. Their reactions are, of course, all too understandably human. They are also quite different. Heather's nearly hysterical conservative impulse is countered by Jessica's reasonable insistence that there is more at stake than one person's happiness and that Pat's decision cannot be considered independently since he has family roles and relationships. This is her position as she articulates it at the board meetings. But in the dramatic situation she is shown as feminine in her inability to distinguish between the personal and professional issues, and her support of the family here is directly opposed to her resistance to Joe's marriage proposals. Furthermore, though her rhetoric may be acceptable in itself, it is undermined by the degree to which, though she is against the board's decision in terms of content, her rational process actually mirrors that of the other directors. Like them, she wants to leave the situation alone and hopes for some other solution than that proposed by the self-determining individual.

Thus, though Heather and Jessica are linked by their representativeness as a wrong kind of personalized and female intolerance and are jointly the objects of didactic manipulation, they are separated by the fact that Jessica is herself a constituent of the threats to Heather's selfhood. She is a professional, and even more than the other professionals on the board of directors, she tends to repress her real motives. And she perpetuates the system of domination that results in Heather's dependency and "neurosis." We are led to suspect Jessica in the first hour in particular. The finer points are confirmed, however, by a scene late in the second episode. Jessica's work is finished, and she is leaving Medical Center again. Joe accuses her of wanting control in a relationship, and he becomes the spokesman for relationships — specifically, marriage — based on equality and individual work and identity. "All marriages don't fail," he says. "Enough do," she replies, even as she is saved from her unfeminine resistance and cynicism in the usual way. He embraces her, and of course she gets to like it as they go along. This relationship is left open to further and future negotiation, though Jessica continues to resist the institutionalization of it in the form of marriage. In effect, she seems more like a determined bachelor than a feminist, while both her support of Heather's marital ambitions and the rejection of them for herself is left in the limbo of personal inadequacies and embitterments.

Jessica's role is symmetrical with Pat's to Heather. She is as "masculine" as he is "feminine." The unmarried professional woman emerges in terms that define her as a transferred epithet in the codicities of sexual stereotyping, both in her own relations and by linking them with those of the transsexual deviant. But even when it is located thus, Jessica's role is not one that is confessed in the narrative, which suggests that the threat to the status quo implied by the unmarried professional woman

may be the latent content that constitutes the secretions and the ideological bias of the whole. Jessica embodies those contradictions which no character in the drama can face. By pursuing her own fulfillment, she seems to be denying warmth, love, passion, *et al*, to herself and those closest to her. Pat can challenge the whole sexual-political system, or at least crave to be the obverse of what he was physically and emotionally. But Jessica cannot even utter what it would be for her to be emotionally whole, or imagine a mode of social relations that would accommodate the disparities in her professional and sexual identities. Nor can the audience, for the only words in that direction are Joe's, "Go away and think about yourself. Then come back and marry me."

Jessica is doubly defined throughout, too feminine in her professional capacities, too masculine in her personal life, damned if she is and damned if she isn't. It is this figure, then who must be doubly and duplicitously dealt with, and around whom specifically ideological effects might be traced.

The covert message that revolves around Jessica focuses the problems that the drama does not attempt to address or resolve. The conception of her role as a sister is troubling in itself. Though there is no question of the two women competing for a man, or even for men in general, they are more deeply divided than ever. Furthermore, the nature of this dilemma indicates why it is impossible for the narrative to suggest a future for the relationship between Pat and Heather, or imagine anything but a continuance of her professional prerogatives, "in another country," for Pat. Sexual patrimonies can be more or less dealt with because there is a developed code of male-to-male approach in the aggressive version of touch; that there is no equivalent between the women leaves only the alternatives of marriage or isolated exile for both Jessica and Pat.

Jessica and Pat are the significant "shadow" pairing in the narrative; the failure to deal with the fate of one implies that there is a corresponding failure in the presentation of the other. But Heather and Joe are also paired in several respects. They are both "normal" in their relations to sex roles and work or the lack of it. They have both been waiting for the return of a former mate (though that's hardly all, or primarily, what Joe has been doing), and both are left alone again in the end. In this set of conjugations there is an evasion similar to those discovered in the Pat-Jessica combination. Though they both end with jobs instead of marriages, Heather's is an inexplicably facile solution since she gets the first job that comes along without actually applying for it and without experience or qualifications.

Finally, in contrast to the complex negations in the relationship between the women in the drama, Pat and Joe are united by their commitment to the rights of the individual and by the need to secure the tolerance that would permit an actualization of those rights. If Jessica is put into a series of double binds by her relations, Pat is presented as having a

social and psychological reserve in his professional self-definition, as well as Joe's genuinely supportive and effective solidarity. It is interesting that we see Pat working (dictating a procedure at least) even in a condition of severe emotional stress. Conversely, we see Jessica in a state of emotional stress when she is supposedly "working," in the committee meetings and again when she studies a patient's documents in hostile avoidance of Joe. What is defined as therapy in one case is implicitly an evasion in the other. Furthermore, the plot's resolution guarantees the truth value of the lesson that revolves around Pat, while it leaves the two women more or less successfully adapting to the fact that they have lost (again).

There is a shift between the two episodes as the woman problem recedes, but taken together the episodes affirm, dismantle, and in several important respects reaffirm certain prevalent assumptions about the nature of sexual deviance and the consequent tensions in the ideologies of sex roles and the relations based on them. The program achieves its objective by concentrating on the dynamics of its overt issue and screening the "noise" of extraneous concerns. In some ways, the medical show simply reverts to its own generic history. Unlike TV generally these days, this show's characters are completely white and the show betrays not the slightest indication that anyone lives on less than a professional salary. Implicitly this generates the notion that problems like sexual deviance intervene only in the social relations of what is, in economic terms, a minority culture. Inverting the *modus operandi*, we might discover that what is absent from the message is perhaps its major determinant as an ideological structure. The threats to individual integrity and the disruption of sexual relationships and the family are not in any sense attached to economic issues like unemployment. There is no problem in continuing to support a family one no longer participates in, and either sex seems able to get a job at will, and where and when they want one. There is a corresponding disparity between the program and the more genuinely universalized culture in which it is embedded.

The hope of transforming sex-role ideologies contrasts rather incongruously with the advertisements that punctuate the show's quarter-hour segments (and which were, of course, the usual things: bosoms encased in "summer wear" while an authenticating male voice does the actual job of selling Woolite, "Gentlemen prefer Haynes" and "International women use Oil of Olay," a football team pouring into a locker-room to change into their Florsheim idlers, other TV programs, sixteen varieties of Friskies cat food, and Lorne Green for Alpo). Even my local television guide contributed towards projecting an interpretation: "Dr. Gannon must choose between the wishes of the woman he wants to marry and the desires of a colleague (parental judgment advised)." [\(13\)](#)

Television has come some distance from the time when a critic could say that many of its "so-called creative people," being

"mindful of the power and affluence of TV, feel guilty about the medium's abuse and genuinely want to make a social contribution. TV's didacticism better enables its practitioners to endure their prosperity. And it is too easy a temptation to dismiss this as sanctimoniousness or opportunism, easier still to reject their efforts as artistically inept ... Within its own drastic limits, television is a civilizing agency, at least an acculturating one ... Television teaches us not so much how to live as how to put up with the lives we have to live." [\(14\)](#)

That television has acculturated us so thoroughly is often located as the source of much of contemporary civilization's discontents, but there is an important shift in its emphasis on changing the lives and roles we find ourselves in. And, along with prosperity, it would seem that patriarchy must now be endured, accounted for, and to some extent interrogated. We cannot simply dismiss the media's new preoccupations on the grounds of cooptation or a similar catch-all accusation. The pressures of the women's movement and Gay Liberation have forced the media to come to terms with women who are doctors and don't want to be wives, who are unhappy in traditional roles (to say nothing of men who aren't happy either), and who lead lives which are not easily stereotyped.

The easy accusation of media hype is less satisfying when we note that television's response also embraces the changing facts and contradictions of our culture. Do we call it coincidence or irony that the summer rerun of this program was broadcast almost simultaneously with that of a tennis tournament in which a real transsexual doctor figured? And one cannot fail to note that the program does achieve its overt goals, at least among those who were already more or less persuaded. An audience survey of my friends revealed that its educative function figured high in the list of evaluative criteria, and that it had been well received.

The problem is that especially the covert messages leave me wondering just where we have arrived. Elements of a rhetoric that questions conventional sex roles attach themselves negatively to a professional woman whose double definitions are seen to endanger both her work and her relationships. Other confusing elements attach to a man who has penis-hatred. (This last expression is, I realize, a strong one, but becomes justified as a polemical device when we compare Joseph Heller's confessed sexism and his observation in *Something Happened* that penis envy is a male attribute projected onto women; only a simple reversal is necessary to arrive at my formulation.) Anyway, Pat is the test case of deviant behavior in his desire to transfer his own sexual role. He at least gets what she wants (that is, Pat's female self is the only unequivocal female success in the drama), so that the diegesis or story underwrites the values associated with this issue of "becoming a woman."

Still, other dubious values attach to the male series regular, Joe, which

values are, in the nature of the case, already guaranteed. It becomes relatively transparent that the project of a marriage based on equality, individual integrity and two-way work opportunities here is only concomitant with libertarian, egalitarian and "professional" ideals that are a bourgeois constitutional premise and still basically a male preserve — and which, in any event, leave actual procedures for their fulfillment unspecified. Finally, both women are mediated to us by the degree to which they are able to act on "their" man's advice and evaluations. Heather does begin to "make a life for herself," as Pat had begun by telling her she must do, and Joe is able to rest his argument against Jessica's defensive model of marriage as a loss of self-determination in the claim that that's "not what he wants for her." Once more, the men have the last word.

As McCabe indicated would be the case, we are indeed left with few "perspectives for struggle" in the attempt to transform the ideologies of sexual roles. An equally serious charge against the program is that the entire project of challenging sexual stereotypes is left in the hands of "people like that," as one of my informally polled audience (and the only one who expressed satisfaction with traditional roles) persisted in calling Pat. Furthermore, there are fundamental evasions invested in the use of subcodes like that of movement; in fact, we might not really be able to call it a code at all, since it is finally impossible to distinguish among its applications. Jessica is characterized negatively by it while Pat is at least partly seen in positive terms as the result of it.

One of these characters has penetrated the male preserve of the workspace while the other seeks to enter into the opposite sexuality itself, but the repressions of the text make it difficult to see just what characterizes and locates the differences in male / female / deviant / children's mobility and "turf." Only in combination with other codes like touch and aggression does the movement code contribute to a definite set of shapes or constitute specifiable relations. Similarly, Pat's transsexuality and Jessica's ambiguities are presented as both the source of the threat and the means of recuperating liberal values in spite of dismemberments to the family and heterosexual relationships generally. The model of personal and social engagement is thus represented as a structure of transference rather than transformation.

And finally, the program significantly abstains from considering certain pertinent social facts that are at the crux of its concerns, such as the fact that *lack* of work, especially for women, is more likely to produce the kinds of dismemberment that the show details than do Jessica's ambitions; it tends to secrete the fact that Jessica's role is much of a concern in the first place. In the end, we learn virtually nothing about what might be truly threatening to the sexual-political balance that the program and our society so carefully maintains, or about what the personal and social dimensions of a sexually classless society or of a radical challenge to this one might be. But perhaps that would be to demand another Utopian content than the one offered (which would seem to resolve its problems by sending the dissidents away, telling

them to love the rules of the game or leave it). What I have really been concerned with here is simply to articulate in the light of a specific and concrete example the modes by which cultural meaning is produced.

Notes:

[1.](#) The summer rerun which prompted this piece was seen on the CBS network on August 31 and September 6, 1976.

[2.](#) David Boroff, "Television and the Problem Play," *TV as Art*, ed. Patrick D. Hazard (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966), pp. 98-99.

[3.](#) In any case, rational arguments and the devices of persuasion and emotional manipulation are unlikely to increase a capacity for, in this case, sexual tolerance. In fact, as Adorno discovered, appeals to sympathy for the plight of minority groups may do more harm than good when directed to people who deeply fear that they might be identified with weakness or suffering. See *The Authoritarian Personality* and the discussion of its findings in Dallas W. Smythe, "Some Observations on Communications Theory," *Sociology of Mass Communications*, ed. Denis McQuail (London: Penguin, 1972) p. 24. Smythe summarizes, "No lasting increase in people's capacity to see and be themselves can be expected from manipulative devices ... The devices of salesmanship won't work to make people less authoritarian" or to eradicate the irrationalities of social discrimination. Surely, in this program the situation is predicated on not wanting your daughter to marry one and builds on fears of the type Adorno refers to; there is also another fear altogether that has to do with the woman rather than the transsexual doctor.

[4.](#) Philip Elliott, 'Mass Communications — A Contradiction in Terms?' in McQuail, p. 257.

[5.](#) Roger Silverstone, "An Approach to the Structural Analysis of the Television Message," *Screen*, 17:2 (Summer 1976), 9.

[6.](#) Pam Cook, "'Exploitation' Films and Feminism," *Screen*, 17:2 (Summer 1976), 123-25.

[7.](#) Fredric Jameson, "Introduction/Prospectus: To Reconsider the Relation of Marxism to Utopian Thought," *Minnesota Review*, 6 (Spring 1976), 58.

[8.](#) Philip Elliott, for example, hypothesizes a continuum on which the function, scope, source and audience relationship of the "realistic" serial are close to "the high cultural model of artistic creativity." McQuail, p. 246.

[9.](#) To set up an interesting and useful contrast, these relationships are unified in most sit-coms. The *lack* of contradiction between individuality and collectivity, between public and private, becomes

naturalized as the home and family are conceived as "work" and an institution in their own right. This is reified in the single-set situation.

[10.](#) Another TV quotable, courtesy of a secretary in a mid-sixties DEFENDERS. Cited by David Boroff, p. 113.

[11.](#) This is, by the way, the only instance in which a woman unequivocally speaks on behalf of liberal attitudes and assumes an overtly didactic function. But Skip's case is such a transparent one and the woman here such a sweet young thing, bound moreover to a traditional role of servitude, that it hardly constitutes a break in the hegemony of male-initiated value systems. Jessica's role is more complex and more compromised, as we shall see.

[12.](#) Colin McCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," *Screen*, 15:2 (Summer 1974), 16.

[13.](#) *London Free Press* (Ha!). Friday, Sept. 3, 1976.

[14.](#) David Boroff, pp. 98, 100.

Robin Wood as poddleganger

by William Van Wert

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Poddleganger is a made-up word. It comes from *doppelganger*, the German word for "double" (as in the man versus his shadow in *THE STUDENT OF PRAGUE* or the two Marias in Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS*). But the root word in question here is pod, as in Don Siegel's *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*. Robin Wood is a poddleganger: Wood says one thing only to be contradicted by Wood's pod look-alike. My case in point is Wood's article "In Defense of Art" in the July-August (1975) issue of *Film Comment*, in which the breezy and eclectic confessions of a cultist are politically very clear: Wood is radically threatened by anything left of Louis XIV. He will portray himself as Rousseau's noble savage out in the woods, as Thoreau's self-taught man, and, more importantly, as an upstanding patriot whose film criticism preserves democracy (capitalism).

He will attack anything to do with film with a leftist political orientation or with new theories that might render auteur theory and armchair criticism a little bit obsolete. Thus, he will attack Bertold Brecht as theoretician, Jean-Luc Godard as filmmaker, Peter Wollen as film critic, and *Screen* as film magazine. The clash Wood sets up is that between *art* and *politics*, with art winning every time. His friends are "truth" and "beauty"; his enemies are subversives, revolutionaries, communists. What is clear in his article is that he treats his enemies in terms of static politics and not in terms of art in process. What is less clear, but just as important to note, is that what Wood sets up as art is just as political as what he dismisses.

From the very beginning of the article, there are two Woods speaking. There's the simple Robin, the humanist who's "just plain folks" like you and me ("I have tried to be myself, and to go my own way. Yet I always seemed to get on easily enough with my fellows in different camps, despite my intermittent tendency to insult some of them in print.") And then there's the cultured Robin, the one who's self-educated enough to throw allusions to literature, painting and music everywhere he goes, all the while stressing his personal response to each:

"I have spent fifteen years educating myself to respond to and feel at home with the Schönberg quartets, a process at first painfully frustrating, ultimately deeply rewarding. I can now 'hear' the Third Quartet (reputedly the most difficult) almost as naturally as I hear the Beethoven Third Symphony. This places me among a very small minority, but I am not aware of any self-congratulatory feelings of superiority."

Uneasy and forced comparisons to and fro between the arts usher forth from split Robin's mouth. He quotes Yeats' "The Second Coming" about the apocalypse at the outset, and one wonders uneasily if the quote has anything to do with Wood's going off to Canada for three years. The next time he quotes Yeats, it's to put down Godard: translate that as "art quashes politics one more time." The heading for section II of the article is even more curious: "Schubert Replies to Colin McArthur." Translate that: Robin Wood replies to Colin McArthur on the latter's review of Peter Harcourt's *Six European Directors*. Robin Wood "understands" Schubert and likes Peter Harcourt's book. Robin Wood doesn't understand/doesn't like Cohn McArthur's marxist analysis of the Harcourt book, so Schubert replies to Colin McArthur: art quashes politics one more time.

One more example: Robin Wood attacks Jean-Luc Godard throughout the article, especially the Godard of *WIND FROM THE EAST* (1969). Critic Peter Wollen wrote on *WIND FROM THE EAST* as an example of modernism. Wood "attacks" Wollen by proposing that Godard's film is much easier to read than George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. One more time Wood dredges up a past master to prove that the other critics are wrong and that art quashes politics.

It's a curious attack for anyone, let alone Robin Wood, to take. The very nature of his attack (his attacktics) was what kept me reading. I really didn't understand where he was coming from (apart from three years in Canada listening to Schubert's *Winterreise* for breakfast, while cooking, while gardening). I was most perplexed by Wood's digression on Fra Filippo Lippi's Annunciation ("that hangs in Room III of London's National Gallery"). What did the painting have to do with anything else in the article?

I went back to the beginning and noticed that this article is an excerpt from a forthcoming book, *Personal Views: Explorations in Style*, to be published by the Gordon Fraser Gallery (London). The publisher in this case seems to explain a great deal of what's to be published. Wood has an ideology to peddle, within the restrictions imposed by having an art gallery as publisher of his book. Wood includes as allies both past and present poets, painters and composers, which implies that time, tradition and art galleries are on his side. Apparently, he feels so threatened that he must dredge up Bach and Beethoven to put down Brecht and Godard. Wood gets to attack his peer group (Colin McArthur, Peter Wollen, *Screen*), and the Gallery is pleased, because we readers now know where to look for Lippi's painting (Room III).

What emerges is a split meaning for "art" in the title of the article. There's the "art" of film and then there's the "Art" of Yeats, Schubert, Schönberg, Beethoven, Mozart, Mahler, Haydn, Bach, Fra Filippo Lippi, George Eliot, and Brecht. This second "Art" no doubt is pleasing to the publisher, but it's very confusing to the reader whose interest is in the "art" of film. In his inimitably disorganized way, Wood ties the two meanings of "art" together. Near the end of the article Wood is ostensibly talking about Godard and Brecht:

"In TOUT VA BIEN he (Godard) has Yves Montand (as ex-New Wave filmmaker) say: 'I've discovered things that Brecht was into forty years ago.' The remark is made in connection with Montand's abandonment of a cherished project to film a David Goodis novel. Goodis wrote the book on which SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER was based, and Godard uses his name for a character in MADE IN U.S.A."

Confused Robin Wood talks about Godard and Brecht. Clear Robin Wood brings in David Goodis, which brings in Truffaut (SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER) and earlier Godard (MADE IN U.S.A.) when Godard was less political and easier for Wood to assimilate within the categories of New Wave and auteur theory.

After noting that any Mozart opera would respond to a Brechtian treatment these days, Wood ends the article by contrasting the worldview of Godard in WIND FROM THE EAST with the worldview in Jane Austen. Translate that: Godard / David Goodis / Brecht versus Robin Wood / Mozart / Jane Austen.

Enough of jump-cutting. If Robin Wood is so obviously ludicrous in this article, then why am I taking the time to point it out? It matters little that Wood can allude as he does. It matters little that he attacks *Screen*. I would too, but for somewhat different reasons, which the rest of this article should make clear. The attack on *Screen* is not the point. After all, not many readers of *Film Comment* would also be subscribers to *Screen*. The point is that there are many readers of *Film Comment* and many readers of Robin Wood. For that reason alone, Wood's misconceptions about semiology and marxist film criticism should be corrected. To use a Godard dictum: "form is content." An analysis of Wood's form in this article will reveal his content, specifically, his ideology. Wood states: "This is scarcely the place for political debate (and I am scarcely a political thinker)." I intend to show how very political he really is.

Let's return, then, to the poddelganger theory. Admittedly, Wood has axes to grind. He and other auteur critics like Ian Cameron and Andrew Sarris would obviously identify more with *Sequence*, *Movie* and *Monogram* than with *Screen*, which has supplanted the former three in terms of importance in British film criticism. It's as if, like Rip Van Winkle, Wood emerged from three years in Canada to find that he'd become an anachronism. It's equally understandable that Wood should feel alien to semiology, which proposes to study film's language (as a

language) and to study films as systems rather than study them as individual entities. It's also clear that he should feel threatened by marxist film criticism, which attacks "impressionist" critics like Wood. And perhaps, if he's really like Rip Van Winkle, it's understandable that he should lump *Screen*, semiology and marxism together into one giant monster. After all, when the Japanese westernized, they put on a Kabuki-style *Hamlet* in the 1920s in which the actor delivering the "to be or not to be" soliloquy did it riding a bicycle. It was all the same to them.

Wood's unkindest cut about his three villains is in the form of a film allusion which appears at the beginning of the article:

"If I sound at times like Kevin McCarthy in the later stages of *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, the reader's forgiveness is asked in advance. It does seem to me sometimes as if, every time I turn around, another of my acquaintances has become a pod."

For Kevin McCarthy, substitute Joe McCarthy. *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* is a film about "aliens" taking over human bodies. In those red-scare years aliens also meant communists. Wood's thinly-disguised allusion is a ploy/plea for our approval. His attack is that of the humanist ("it is directly relevant to my work as a critic and as a teacher that I set supreme value on the quality — and individuality — of the individual life"), while the "aliens" here (*Screen*, semiology, marxism, Godard, McArthur, Wollen) are to be seen as anti-human, unfeeling communists. So: how can any good American resist such an argument? Let's see ...

AGAINST "AGAINST IMPRESSIONISTIC CRITICISM"

Talk about negative space. Wood picks on Manny Farber. Part of Wood agrees with the semiologists (I think Wood really means marxists here) that Farber is impressionistic, while another part of Wood really admires Farber's "extraordinary associational processes." Wood quotes Farber on Godard (the "resonance" of *WEEKEND*), but he doesn't tell us anything about Peter Harcourt on Godard. It's curious, because Godard is one of the six directors treated by Harcourt, and Wood is "defending" Harcourt. The conclusion for Wood is the following: "If it isn't semiological, then it's impressionistic." Wood attributes that conclusion to semiology; I attribute it to Wood, since I haven't found any such polarized conclusions in the work of any of the semiologists I've read. The section concludes with the voice of the fence sitter:

"Meanwhile, my quarrel is less with what it is actually doing than with its arrogant self-assertion: the common assumption that any alternative is now discredited and made obsolete by its example."

Translate that: what they're doing is okay, but I'm not doing it, so, because of "them" I feel discredited and obsolete.

AGAINST "SCHUBERT REPLIES TO COLIN McARTHUR"

What's curious about this section is Wood's scathing attack on Colin McArthur (who attacked Peter Harcourt) without any semblance of a defense of Harcourt. It's really Wood versus McArthur. Wood quotes McArthur on Harcourt:

"Mr. Harcourt's romantic commitment to the personal response of the critic is paralleled by his ultimate commitment to the notion of personal artistry... the materialistic critic would offer an alternative model of the critical activity. Naturally, he would pay scant heed to his own (or anyone else's) personal response to a film since, from the materialist perspective, personal responses are not personal at all but are culturally and class-determined."

Wood responds by forcing the personal response on the culturally and class-determined one:

"If I sit next to someone from roughly the same cultural background as myself watching TOKYO STORY, RIO BRAVO, or DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER, am I to assume that our responses will be identical?"

Wood seems, to assume that the materialist critic's method would deny him his soul or something and that class determination means automaton film criticism, when, in fact, it merely means applying a methodology a little more scientific than that of the armchair personal opinion, opinion which obscures the "work of art" (Wood's term) by the language of the critic (Farber's extraordinary associational processes obscuring Godard's WEEKEND).

An attack on Godard's using Yeats is sandwiched between an attack on McArthur as one of the "'intellectuals' of film criticism" and a praise of Wood as one of the last noble savages:

"I have been told, on very good authority, that I am an 'anti-intellectual,' because my work consistently implies a refusal to separate my emotional life from my intellectual life."

Here again Wood is a poddelganger. On the one hand, he states:

"Let me say at once that the posing of relationships between socio-economic structures and aesthetic structures seems to me an admirable and potentially very rewarding critical pursuit. Also, there could be no objection to anyone's examining the cinema as a social process."

In the next breath, the other Wood affirms: "This cannot, however, logically be considered a substitute for the traditional relationship between art and criticism." By almost anyone's standards, using Fra Filippo Lippi to refute the stance of a film journal (*Screen*) would not be

considered the "traditional relationship between art and criticism." What Wood fails to understand here is that those "intellectuals" of film criticism are not attacking art; rather, they're attacking criticism. Wood seems to be justifying the former by his own brand of the latter when he writes:

"When the decision becomes exclusively one of the intellect and the will — when it is determined, that is, by a rigidly held body of dogma, allegiance to which demands that our spontaneous responses be suppressed — then we do both ourselves and art an injury."

Anyone but the sorriest boob can see that the use of the intellect does not preclude spontaneous responses. If they're spontaneous, how can they be suppressed? What's asked for is that those responses not preclude the intellect, that those initial responses not be the critic's sole guide to film-writing, that something beyond rough draft criticism be possible.

AGAINST "*SCREEN'S* DIRTY WORDS"

Typical of Wood's rough-draft approach to aesthetics is his attack on *Screen* for "dirty words" without ever giving us examples of those words in context. If the reader is unfamiliar with *Screen*, he/she can only take Wood's word for it; they're against the traditional, against the aesthetic, against the avant-garde. There are no *Screen* quotes to contradict Wood. I have two objections to *Screen's* being the bully for Robin Wood's haymakers. One involves contradictions in Wood's arguments; the other involves some fundamental misrepresentations on Wood's part, whether intentional or not.

Even if *Screen* were the monster Wood sets it up to be, the mode of attack Wood chooses would be suspicious. One gets the feeling that Robin Wood cannot understand what's being written these days in *Screen*; so, he attacks words out of context rather than dealing with theories and arguments *in toto*. I could admire Wood if he would admit he can't read *Screen*; I think *Screen's* most ardent subscribers would complain from time to time of incoherent or obscure texts. But Wood here uses *Screen* as a vehicle for a more scathing attack on semiology and marxism, as though *Screen* were the official organ of either or both!

It's a new dictionary that Robin Wood proposes. Dirty Word number one is *bourgeois*. Wood somehow gets from "bourgeois" as a negative word ("none of us wants to be thought 'bourgeois'") to "bourgeois ideology" as something not only desirable, but also fundamentally "human":

"Impulses of love, generosity, and tolerance, all readiness to listen to other points of view, everything we have learned to call, in the finest sense, 'human' — all these are aspects of 'bourgeois ideology' and its means of perpetuating itself."

This path of double distortion is hard to follow. On the one hand, he's saying *Screen* is wrong when he goes ad hominem (that is, *Screen* is bourgeois, *Screen* is elitist, Godard is elitist, the enemy is everything it attacks). On the other hand, Wood suggests that, even if the enemy is right, it's better to remain as one is, for "bourgeois" equals "human."

As for "elitism," Wood takes a double track to the point of jabberwocky. His argument seems to be that the artists most in favor with the editors at *Screen* are in fact the most elitist. Counterbalancing this argument is Wood's assertion that his appreciation of Schubert, Mozart, Beethoven and Schönberg may very well put him in an elite (a minority), but he would certainly not exclude others from appreciating these composers.

"To put it succinctly, nothing is ever going to come between me and *The Magic Flute*. It is not, however, an elite from which I would wish anyone to feel excluded; on the contrary, I would like to share my advantages with as many others as possible. That is why I am a teacher."

It is difficult not to see the elitism running rampant through Wood's arguments. He takes Godard/Gorin to task on the issue of elitism in terms of *audience*. Yet he justifies his own elitism in terms of *personal preference*. Like comparing apples and oranges. What is necessary to understand Wood's argument on both tracks is an analysis of class and class values. It makes me want to play Brahms for Robin Wood, to let him appreciate the music in his own rarefied vacuum, and then to play the same Brahms for him with the visuals of Buñuel's *LAS HURDES*.

Wood's failure to come to terms with art as a product of its culture permits him to continue armchair criticism without documentation.

"I have come to feel, during the past few years, that *SANSHO THE BAILIFF* and *TOKYO STORY* may be superior to any American film I know — superior even to *VERTIGO*, to *RIO BRAVO*, to *LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN* — superior in a greater maturity of vision, and in the completeness and conscious authority with which that vision is realized."

What "maturity of vision" are we to measure here, if not that of Robin Wood ("I have come to feel, during the past few years...")? For those of us who are not in the same armchair as Wood, what exactly do "maturity of vision," "completeness" and "conscious authority" mean? Can they be measured in terms of the specific content of the film frame or must they be resurrected from the subjective recesses of Robin Wood's mind? This kind of freelance facile criticism insists that guides like Robin Wood are needed for the appreciation of films, that they alone and the test of time can judge the merits of a work, because they have given us no methodology for judging the works ourselves. What is really needed is a working methodology for viewing films, one which would allow an audience gradually to assume the role of critic for itself.

Screen is not the answer to Wood's nontologies. It suffers from faddism, chronic jargonese, catalogue sickness, and theory without practice. Yet, *Screen* has published English translations of current French thought on such subjects as semiology, structuralism, Brecht and Freud. The reader should not be content with Robin Wood's dismissal of *Screen* nor even with my dismissal of Wood concerning *Screen*; she/he should also read Julia Lesage's article, "The Human Subject-You, He or Me? (Or, the Case of the Missing Penis)" which first appeared in JUMP CUT (No. 4) and was then reprinted in *Screen* (Summer 1975).

AGAINST THE MYTH OF MODERNISM

In his attack on modernism, Wood implies that a guide (Wood is available) is needed; explicitly, he favors George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to both Peter Wollen as critic and Godard as filmmaker, because (1) Eliot's book wins on the test of time (the older is better, à la Thoreau), and (2) it wins on the test of complexity. But here again, Wood marches two differing contexts to the fore. The complexity of Godard's WIND FROM THE EAST is felt by Wood to be elitist because incomprehensible. Here complexity means befuddlement; hence, a debit. The complexity of Eliot's novel derives from the co-participation Wood feels invited to while reading: hence, a credit. Where Wood cannot comprehend, he attaches blame; where he can keep up and fill out, as it were, he throws a rose.

Yet, it is easy to see that Wood is not as interested in defending nineteenth-century fiction as he is in attacking "modernist" critics: in this case, Peter Wollen. Wollen is the straw man, perhaps because he has been the most articulate (accessible) proponent of structuralist and semiological approaches to film, including approaches to older film theories like the auteur theory, or perhaps because Wollen has revised his very popular *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* to include a chapter on the avant-garde in film, a chapter which, among other things, praises Godard and finds fault with Robin Wood.

"However, the structures discerned in the text are often attacked in another way. Robin Wood, for example, has argued that the auteur film is something like a Platonic Idea. It posits a real film, of which the actual film is only a flawed transcript, while the archi-film itself exists only in the mind of the critic. This attack rests on a misunderstanding. The main point about the Platonic Idea is that it predates the empirical reality, as an archetype. But the auteur film (or structure) is not an archi-film at all in this sense. It is an explanatory device which specifies partially how any individual film works. Some films it can say nothing or next-to-nothing about at all. Auteur theory cannot simply be applied indiscriminately. Nor does an auteur analysis exhaust what can be said about any single film."

Wollen must have been anticipating Robin Wood's certain rebuttal when he concluded:

"There is often a hostility towards any kind of explanation which involves a degree of distancing from the 'lived experience' of watching the film itself. Yet clearly any kind of serious critical work — I would say scientific, though I know this drives some people into transports of rage — must involve a distance, a gap between the film and the criticism, the text and the metatext. It is as though meteorologists were reproached for getting away from the 'lived experience' of walking in the rain or sunbathing. Once again, we are back with the myth of transparency, the idea that the mark of a good film is that it conveys a rich meaning, an important truth, in a way which can be grasped immediately."

Wollen cautions against the myth of transparency which underpins all of Wood's criticism. Wood attacks Wollen's concept of modernism, a chief tenet of which is that the "spectator has to work at reading the text." Wood "exposes" this myth of modernism with accusations of confusion, unclear thought/logic and ultimate error. In a rush of middle-gray prose, Wood dismisses Wollen, along with the other writers at *Screen*. Perhaps Wollen's recent successes as screenwriter (THE PASSENGER) and director (PENTHESILEA, co-directed with Laura Mulvey) have made Wood even more vindictive.

As for Wood's comparisons between Wollen's *AfterImage* article on Godard and his *Signs and Meaning...*, I think something should be said. In the *AfterImage* article, Wollen argues for Godard's style in WIND FROM THE EAST in much the same way that Eric Bentley points out the difference between the epic and dramatic theaters to explicate Brecht. Whereas Wollen approaches Godard through his use of Brechtian devices in the *AfterImage* article, he views Godard much more broadly in the revised *Signs and Meaning*, to the point that Godard is the inheritor of Duchamp and Leger and Buñuel; at the same time, Godard is seen as the dominant influence upon later filmmakers like Dusan Makavejev, Jean-Marie Straub, Skolimowski, Bertolucci, Kluge and Glauber Rocha. It is a new kind of auteur that Wollen suggests in Godard. Wood, whose own leanings have been more towards Claude Chabrol than toward Godard, may have felt compelled to justify his own previous work in light of Wollen's assertions.

IN COUNTERDEFENSE OF *WIND FROM THE EAST*

The questions raised by Wood in his last section are the most far-reaching and the most coherent of his whole jumbled piece. At least, one has to allow that Wood knows how to put on a finish. His opening remarks concerning the differences between "works of art" and "revolutionary tools" seem pointed and provocative. Yet he opts for the former and dismisses the latter, not allowing for the fact that the two often merge over time. Marcel Duchamp is a case in point. His readymades ("In Advance of a Broken Arm — a snow shovel; "Fountain Readymade Urinal"; "With Hidden Noise; "Why Not Sneeze?"; "The Chocolate Grinder" etc.) were a blatant assault upon retinal art, clearly

to be seen as "revolutionary tools." Today, they are appreciated as "works of art." The riots originally caused by the first showings of films like ENTR'ACTE and L'AGE D'OR have been replaced by enthusiastic applause from aficionados in art cinemas.

The reason for such mergers, aside from the usual assimilations by time, seems to stem from a radical change in the *form* of an art, causing a change in audience perception, which, once changed, perceives the exceptional as ordinary. When Godard first displayed his dazzling jump cuts in early films like BREATHLESS, audiences were taxed to keep up with the narrative. The virtuoso technical rule-breaking in those early films was not so tightly aligned with the political themes as in the later films. When Godard seems to deny his own previous knowledge of filmmaking in the later films (WEEKEND on), giving us painfully long takes of "interview" cinema, of characters facing the camera in front of colorless and uninteresting backdrops and working through a political ideology with the audience, Godard is using film as a "revolutionary tool." He is insisting that we *listen*, that we really hear what is being said, because there is nothing interesting in the visuals to divert us from hearing. We can walk out of the film, in which case Godard wins by having provoked us to anger/action; we can sit and accept Godard by the sitting and mere fact of listening to the characters, in which case he wins again. Or we can fall asleep, at which point both we and he lose.

Robin Wood's prognosis on Godard stems not from the future but (as we've come to expect from this latter-day Thoreau) from the past. Godard will be as Brecht has been.

"Yet Brecht is now himself a generally accepted and respected part of tradition; his plays are produced by bourgeois-capitalist theater companies without any sense of incongruity."

Brecht is a good example for showing double vision on the part of critics. Leftist critics tend to emphasize Brecht's political theories about art (the "revolutionary tool" school), while critics like Robin Wood ignore the reasons why Brecht was attacked during the McCarthy era and focus only on the plays (the "works of art" school). A similar phenomenon seems to have developed for viewing Godard, with Godard himself dismissing his early films as "bourgeois" and "playing," or with armchair critics like Wood dismissing the later films as too political and lacking in aesthetic genius or creativity.

The difference here is fundamental and must be understood if readers are ever to dissociate themselves from so-called "guides" and be able to view films for themselves. What Robin Wood insists upon in the work of art is an imitative replica of reality. What Peter Wollen seems to be arguing for in discussing the works of James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Godard and others is the absence of representation, the insistence upon the spectator's participation to complete the work of art/revolutionary tool, and the recognition that what is experimental in art must be understood in terms of *failure* rather than success. The Surrealists

expected riots at their exhibitions and readings. Duchamp expected outrage and insult with his readymades. Godard expects hatred, boredom and confusion from the uninitiated in his audience who, have come to see a work of art and instead see a revolutionary tool. In terms of this concept of failure, which suggests that process is much more important than the finished product, there should be no more distinction between works of art and revolutionary tools. The ultimate assumption, however, posed by such experimental works is that the methods of evaluating them need to change in accordance with the change in form/ content embodied in these works.

Robin Wood obviously can't go around evaluating Peter Wollen and Godard on the same aesthetic continuum on which he evaluates George Eliot or Mozart. He's not far from coming down off the fence and joining his "enemies" ("What, then, is the status of these films, and how does the non-Marxist, but not unsympathetic, critic handle them?"). He's asking, and that is a good start. The first answer given to Robin Wood should be that modernism is no myth in film, just in film criticism. As another old backwoodsman, Robert Frost, once suggested, we don't need better writers; we just need some more "right readers."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Hollywood speaks easy

by Greg Waller

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Richard Koszarski, *Hollywood Directors: 1914-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 364 pp., \$3.95.

"It is always difficult," wrote William Dieterle (dir. ZOLA, PASTEUR) in 1939, "for a man [sic] to speak about his own work." And for the majority of Hollywood directors during the "golden age" it was not merely difficult but almost impossible to write anything concrete and critical about their own films. For instance, Richard Schickel's TV series, THE MEN WHO MADE THE MOVIES, was interesting only when Wellman, Hawks, and the rest strayed from the boring and embarrassing interview format and offered entertaining anecdotes and personal reminiscences. But even the most purebred auteurist would be hard pressed to incorporate these flickering bits of autobiography (or pseudo-biography) into an analysis of THE PUBLIC ENEMY or HIS GIRL FRIDAY.

Unlike Schickel's interviews and in fact almost all printed statements of Hollywood's past masters, Richard Koszarski's *Hollywood Directors: 1914-1940* is not a collection of conversations recorded years after the fact. Rather, it is an anthology of brief articles written between 1914 and 1940 by 50 different Hollywood directors. Only one or two of these pieces are available in any currently published anthology, and Koszarski (who has also catalogued Hollywood camera people for *Film Comment* has ranged beyond Andrew Sarris' "Pantheon," even beyond Sarris "lightly likable" directors, to include a broad sampling of Hollywood filmmakers. Most important of all, this anthology reprints articles written during what is arguably the most interesting and surely the most lively period of English and American film criticism and theory. Contrary to popular belief, serious discussion of film didn't begin with Bazin, nor did Arnheim, Pudovkin *et al* pitch tents in some previously unexplored wilderness. Almost any attempt — outside of nostalgic scavenging — to bring early film criticism and theory back into the public domain seems to me worthwhile. And in this sense, at least, *Hollywood Directors* is valuable.

Still, Koszarski shares with Schickel two basic assumptions. First, the very organization of the book and the central message of François Truffaut's "Foreword" ("All the secrets of the cinema lie there, in what happens in the mind of the director between action and cut") suggest that Hollywood films are best understood in terms of directorial signatures. Second, Koszarski explicitly claims that the comments of these directors will somehow enrich or "inform" our understanding of their films. As would be expected, some of the essays in *Hollywood Directors* do attempt to describe the "art of direction," although the most informative of the descriptive essays is William Cameron Menzies' discussion of the "art director" — not the director per se, but what is today usually referred to as the set designer or production designer.

However, two other noteworthy essays on direction, by George Cukor and John (THE PRISONER OF ZENDA) Cromwell, will make any defensive auteurist snicker, "I-told-you-so." For while Cukor and Cromwell emphasize the collaborative effort involved in above-B quality Hollywood production, they both ultimately posit as the *summum bonum* the director's control over a film's "mood" (Cukor) and the finished product as the director's "individual expression" (Cromwell). Perhaps even more interesting is Cukor neatly corroborates Noel Burch's discussion of the "zero point of cinematic style" (in *Theory of Film Practice*); Cukor affirms that "directorial style must be largely the absence of style."

But even if one prefers to categorize and understand Hollywood movies in terms of major and minor auteurs, only a handful of these essays could possibly further serious criticism of directors or specific films. Actually, many of the articles in *Hollywood Directors* do not touch on directing or individual films at all, and the ones that do treat such topics are most often vague or dull or mere press-agentry. Similar problems also plague several of the autobiographical essays Koszarski includes, although there are some noteworthy touches in the self-portraits by Keaton and Harold Lloyd and the firsthand reminiscences of Thomas Ince and J. Stuart Blackton (the central figure in the Vitagraph studio).

In general, the few comments that struck me as provocative seem to be almost randomly tossed out and left undeveloped — like Harry Langdon's belief that "the four greatest stimuli to laughter are rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness, and unsociability" (No wonder this seems provocative; it's a one-line précis of Henri Bergson's *Laughter*) or Mack Sennett's contention that "Shetland ponies and pretty girls" are not "fair game" for pie throwing while "coppers" and "elegantly dressed elderly men" are. (Perhaps the beginnings here of a structural typology of slapstick characters and an ideological study of the pie as social leveler?) And by far the best essay in the book, William de Mille's "Mickey vs. Popeye," is more about film criticism than film direction. For in a superb parody of all simplistic and solemn studies of the relationship between movies and society, de Mille "analyzes" the victory of Popeye over Mickey Mouse in a 1935 popularity poll and concludes that "the Mickey Mousians of today will be the New Dealers of

tomorrow, whereas the Popeyesians will breed a race of Fascists."

Though few of the other 50 articles can stand without excuse as lively and intrinsically valuable film criticism and even fewer can buttress auteurist exegesis, *Hollywood Directors* is still a relatively useful anthology for anyone concerned with the development of film criticism and theory. Although none of the director/critics are in the same league as Eisenstein or even Pudovkin, they do return again and again to some of the topics that dominated the discussion of the photoplay / cinema / movies between 1908 and 1940. But don't expect any definitive or even challenging examinations of, for example, the status of the movies as a "popular art" or of the relation of stage to screen. The essays Koszarski reprints at best point us toward the questions that were being asked in countless popular periodicals, specialized journals, and little magazines of the period; they don't even hint at the variety of solutions that were offered. To say that an anthology of reprinted pieces like *Hollywood Directors* has "historical interest" is usually to write it off as a collection of outdated curios. But there is such a gap in our understanding of early film criticism and theory that essays that have a bonafide "historical interest" are the first step towards a fuller estimation of the climate of opinion (aesthetic, social, and economic) during the rise of the motion picture industry.

For example, the emergence and enormous popularity of the movies posed major problems for entrenched bourgeois conceptions of the artist, the art object, and the audience — blurring the hallowed boundaries between art and entertainment or commerce and between "human" and mechanical media. One result was a debate over the possibility of "popular" art and the defense of the movies as the "democratic" art par excellence. This motif runs throughout *Hollywood Directors*. In fact, the title of the Chaplin article that Koszarski includes is: "Can Art be Popular?" (originally published in *The Ladies Home Journal*, 1924). Predictably, Chaplin argues that "a slapstick comedy can be just as great a work of art as a Greek tragedy." For he believed, as Frank (MOONRISE) Borzage put it, that "real art can be understood by you and I and by everyone else." Even Fred Niblo — best remembered as the director of the silent BEN HUR — affirmed that movies must be not only *for* the "common man," but *about* him [sic] as well. Thus, "Mr. and Mrs. Everyman will be the stars of the future — the Epic of Everyman."

Easily understood and available to "Everyman," the movies were often assigned an exalted mission, especially by critics writing before 1930. F.W. Murnau and Cecil de Mille may have shared little, but they both reverentially saw cinema as a "world force." De Mille, however, was somewhat more visionary than Murnau (and a little Bazinian as well). After singing the praises of his latest release, KING OF KINGS, de Mille predicted that the movies "will make for unity and for a certain oneness in the world. Ultimately it may even be a oneness with God."

Most early critics who took a positive view of the movies were somewhat more mundane, although even schematic descriptions of film aesthetics

generally included some opinion concerning the high purpose of film — see Munsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), for example. Theoretical discussions of the "nature" and unique "language" of the medium appeared in magazines as disparate as *The Dial* and *Mac Fadden's Fiction Lovers Magazine* as well as in film and theater journals. But judging from Koszarski's anthology, very little film theory originated in Hollywood. Yet an essay on the "proper language of cinematography" by Slavko Vorkapich, Hollywood's resident "montage" expert, does at least suggest the widespread attempt to formulate a "grammar" of "cinematics."

Many more articles in *Hollywood Directors* consider the relation of film to the established arts — de Mille, for example, mentions the "inspiration" he received from the "great paintings of the world — and this too was an obsession of the period, a means of establishing the legitimacy, heredity, or proper domain of the "mechanized muse. For instance, there were well over 250 articles, editorials, and publicity pieces comparing film and theater published before 1940.

But not many critics went as far as D.W. Griffith, who catalogued the "vastly greater potentialities" of screen to stage and enthusiastically announced: "the old stage is gone, the new stage is here." Edmund (GRAND HOTEL) Goulding went even further in an early piece on the sound film, and his paean epitomizes the tendency to discuss film in relation to the other arts. The film of the future, Goulding wrote in the *National Board of Review Magazine*, will be "the soul of Beethoven moving with those of Shakespeare and Rembrandt supplying the complete drama."

Koszarski draws quite a few essays from books like *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry* (1922) and *Breaking into the Movies* (1927), and they suggest a very different preoccupation of the early period. Proliferating photoplay correspondence schools, Horatio Alger-esque autobiographies, and the advice columns of fanzines and trade magazines all conspired to create the image of Hollywood as the ultimate land of opportunity, where furriers became tycoons and the kid next door a starlet or megaphoned director. "Success," Marshall (DADDY LONG LEGS) Neilan told aspiring actresses in 1922, "is on every bough" — within reach of anyone who had one of the "six essentials": beauty, personality, charm, temperament, style, or "the ability to wear clothes." But even if she lacked all of these virtues, a woman might become a director. For according to Ida May Park (a director for Universal in the late teens) and Alice Blaché (Koszarski calls her career between 1907 and 1914 "long and remarkable"), a woman is biologically equipped for directing because she is "naturally religious," innately superior in "matters of the heart," and unrivalled in the "emotional and imaginative faculties."

Hollywood in this beckoning vision is a Jazz Age New Frontier, as American as the land rush in Warner's *THE OKLAHOMA KID* — a "Mecca of the ambitious" (John Ford, 1929). The clearest expression of

this is an essay by Edwin Carewe, written in 1927, before this director fell from high-class literary adaptations like EVANGELINE to what Koszarski refers to as "poverty row projects and religious pictures." Carewe's message echoes with both the favorite rhetoric of 19th century pioneer individualism and the sales pitch optimism of late-night TV commercials for computer programming institutes. "The movies are a challenge to youth," he declares, to the "enthusiasm of a pioneering spirit or a man with new ideas — a barber from Podunk or a school teacher from Oskaloosa may crash his way into the film plants of Hollywood with some fresh ideas and blaze a new and highly successful trail in movie-making."

The flip side to this long-playing spiel is of course Hollywood as cesspool, polluting the American moral climate, and/or Hollywood as factory, stripping the individual artist of soul and inspiration. Such increasingly popular images were promulgated mostly by highbrow critics and social scientists, defenders of decency, and disgruntled screenwriters on the way to the bank or back to the "legitimate — rarely by Hollywood directors in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet *Hollywood Directors* does include some insurgency, some blows, albeit feeble, against the empire. As early as 1914, Sidney Olcott complained about the exhibitor's rejection of his 1912 feature film, FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS (filmed, Olcott tells us, on location in the Holy Land, "an arid inhospitable country"). Later dissidents — Von Stroheim, Vidor, and Milestone, for example — offer little beyond the usual complaints: "machine-made stories," front-office interference, and the art-destroying cash nexus. As might be expected, the most interesting and/or representative essays attacking Hollywood are not by American directors but by critics who are seldom, if ever, anthologized. And the range of this critique was extraordinary, from the elitist sarcasm of theater critics like George Jean Nathan to the "scientific" Payne Fund Studies of the effects of movies on children to the politically and aesthetically sophisticated articles by Harry Alan Potamkin. However, because it is limited to the writings of Hollywood directors, Koszarski's anthology only skims the surface of anti-Hollywood sentiment.

Finally, none of the 50 articles in *Hollywood Directors*, except perhaps William de Mille's, are first- or even second-rate examples of pre-1940 film criticism and theory. Stanley Kauffmann's *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to CITIZEN KANE*, a 400+ page anthology published by Liveright in 1972, gives a much broader and deeper sense of the period — although it is weighted heavily towards reviews rather than criticism or theory. Quite a few valuable early essays by Potamkin and Alexander Bakshy, among others, are included in Lewis Jacobs' *Introduction to the Art of the Movies* (Noonday, 1960), which is still in print and usually available at second-hand bookstores. Most other anthologies offer no pre-Bazin material except for selections from the "pantheon critics and/or truncated excerpts from lesser lights. Probably the best introduction to this period is *The Film Index Volume I: The Film as Art*, a massive and indispensable annotated bibliography compiled in the late 1930s.

By now my own bias should be apparent. Early film criticism and theory definitely needs to be rediscovered and reevaluated not only because we might discover some arcane texts that are "relevant" to current critical debate, but because a comprehensive investigation of this period should help us determine the effect of pre-1940 interests and assumptions on subsequent film study and clarify the complex relationship between the development of movie making and the development of film criticism and theory. Since so little of this material is readily available, Koszarski's *Hollywood Directors* — almost by default — deserves some attention.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dialogue on Film and Photo League

by David Platt and Russell Campbell

from *Jump Cut*, no. 16, 1977, p. 37

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The reward for historical research is that its publication frequently brings out more history. In response to [Russell Campbell's section on the Film and Photo League \(Jump Cut #14\)](#) comes the following letter from David Platt, who served as the National Secretary of the FPL and editor of its publication, *Film Front*. He was also the founder, editor and publisher (with Lewis Jacobs) of *Experimental Cinema* and served as the *Daily Worker* film critic between 1933-1957. He is now a member of the editorial board of *Jewish Currents*, a New York monthly. Following David Platt's letter is a reply by Russell Campbell. To get the original material on the Film and Photo League in *Jump Cut* #14, send \$1.00 (\$1.25 abroad) to *Jump Cut*, P.O. Box 865, Berkeley, CA, 94701. — Eds.

— David Platt

I thought the Film and Photo League section of *Jump Cut* was impressive and valuable, although I felt Russell Campbell's introduction made too much of Muenzenberg's early role, and I think he oversimplified and overrated the connection he suggested existed between the League and Moscow. It was really nothing like that by the time I joined the organization. It is true that the CPUSA played an important role, but the League of which I was a part was rooted in the conditions existing in the country in the early 1930s. It wasn't necessary for anyone on the outside to press buttons to tell us our task was to cover the breadlines, flophouses, picket lines, hunger marches, etc. People interested in films and photos as weapons in the social struggle came over to the League as I did, partly out of admiration for the films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovjenko, and Vertov, but mostly in response to the failure of the older independent documentarians, as well as the commercial film industry, seriously to concern themselves with what was going on in the streets, factories and farms in the years following the stock market crash.

Leo Seltzer, in Campbell's absorbing interview with him, comes fairly close to my own recollection of those times when he states:

"Ours was a total involvement in what was happening in the world on a very practical and realistic level. We filmed the everyday social scene, the economic struggle, and we put it together to represent a realistic, not dramatized point of view, and then we carried those heavyweight 'portable' projectors and films back to the union halls and the picket lines and showed them to an audience that was the living subject of the film."

And he adds:

"The parent organization of the F&PL was the Workers International Relief. Its main purpose was to supply food, clothing and housing to strikers, in order to enable them to stay out and hopefully eventually get what they were striking for. They were quite active in the South, and in Pennsylvania in the mine fields. And under the WIR there were also cultural groups. It was felt that the theatre and film and other media could both entertain and inform. That's what really gave birth to the F&PL ..."

I liked the Seltzer interview but was turned off by his occasional nasty "cracks" about the work of other League members. We were all in the same leaky boat in a driving sea without a compass, rowing as best we knew how toward goals one hoped one could live by. And we were all, at one time or another, equally guilty of all sorts of ridiculous behavior, but who gives a damn about this 40 years later? The important thing is that we all kept our heads above water and survived.

One more thing: Campbell writes that an era of U.S. radical filmmaking came to an end when the Film and Photo League closed its doors. It didn't really. What about the leftwing groups that grew out of the League: Nykino, Frontier Films, New Film Alliance, Associated Film Audiences — doesn't he regard these as part of the independent radical filmmaking of the 1930s? In all my discussions of the League, I always stress that it was the battleground and training ground for many future practitioners of film and photo art: screenwriters, directors, photographers, film critics, film magazines, film societies, film distributors — on both coasts. This movement lasted well into the 1940s.

The bibliography and filmography that Campbell (and Buzz Alexander) researched so carefully are indeed very, very important. But shouldn't the bibliography include some references to the League's notable campaigns against reactionary films like the Nazi S.A. MANN — BRAND, and Hollywood's CALL TO ARMS and RED SALUTE and against city, state and federal censorship laws and especially against the censorship of the Catholic Legion of Decency? Our pioneering made things easier for the present generation of film workers. I find an

underestimation of this important League activity throughout the *Jump Cut* issue.

Finally, it was good to see how well Sam Brody's film writings hold up with age, but I was disappointed that in his interview with Tony Safford, Brody left the reader with the impression that in the 1930s and 40s, Hollywood was one gray reactionary mass. Then, in truth, as a result of the mass protests and picketing of theatres led by the Film and Photo League, which at times involved hundreds of thousands, there was a sharp decline in the mid-1930s in Hollywood anti-labor, pro-war and aggressively racist themes, as well as a corresponding increase in significant Hollywood social films under the impact of the New Deal, the anti-fascist struggles, the CIO organizing drives. Nevertheless, I fully share Brody's view that today,

"we need a new left film organization that would be tailored to the needs of our own times with a 'rage' not merely for film for its own sake, but to put this powerful medium at the service of progress and change."

At the same time one should not fall victim to the view that it is futile to try to combat the corruption of the commercial industry, as that would leave an important front in the battle of ideas wide open for the enemy's propaganda. We thrashed this out in the 1930s and concluded that it was necessary to wage a fight on both fronts. Our judgment was sustained by the results.

— Russell Campbell

Thanks to David Platt for drawing attention to FPL activities, particularly the anti-censorship campaigns, with which he was closely involved and which I neglected in my article. I wished to concentrate on the League's film production work, but I should at least have indicated the extent of its other concerns.

My conclusion, "an era in American radical cinema was at an end," is, I see, open to misinterpretation. I didn't, of course, wish to negate the work of Nykino, Frontier Films, et al., but there is a sense in which, in organization and aesthetic, they represent a break with the League, and hence mark a new era.

On the "Berlin-Moscow" connection: I scarcely mention Moscow, and I didn't state, nor did I wish to imply, that someone outside the country was "pressing buttons." Muenzenberg's organization was highly decentralized and relied a great deal on local initiative, which is perhaps why it was so successful. The important things, I think, are first, that the FPL's work was paralleled in several other countries, and second, that it enjoyed Communist "sponsorship — the term I used in my first paragraph — i.e. that the FPL got some organizational and occasional financial assistance from the WIR and the CPUSA (which at that time explicitly described itself as a "Section of the Communist

International"). Naturally the FPL concentrated on supporting Communist campaigns. FPL members, I am sure, needed no prodding from abroad to dramatize the issues of unemployment, racist oppression, etc.. Organizationally, it's probable that the CP maintained effective control of the League through placing Party functionaries in key executive positions and through its "fraction" among the League members.

Nevertheless, I may have overstated the Communist involvement. My stress on it was, I felt, necessary to compensate for its conspicuous absence in previous accounts of the FPL, e.g. the Brandon interview in *Film Quarterly* and Bill Nichols' piece in *Screen*.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Front Critical dialogue

by Reynold Humphries

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At the risk of being denounced as puerile and arrogant, I should like to express my complete agreement with Michael Rosenthal's views on [THE FRONT \(Jump Cut No. 14\)](#).

What does the film do? It gives the impression that blacklisting was the result of pressure by *individual* sponsors of TV programs, thus suppressing the role of Wall Street and, by extension, the need for capitalism to remove all domestic challenge. This is serious enough, but worse is to come.

Woody Allen's defiance of the Committee is not political. It is moral: commitment to a woman who is there primarily to allow him to stand up (literally) and be a man. Politically this is right-wing (individualism first). It is also sexist: the woman, albeit sympathetic and progressive, functions for the man. Thus when he is taken off to prison, she is there and we, the audience, know she'll be waiting for him when he gets out and that they'll live happily ever after. Audience fantasies and desire for a "happy end" (plus the desire for the film to continue after it has finished) are taken care of and politics get the cold shoulder.

Not only is "go fuck yourselves!" hardly a political statement, the circumstances are highly dubious. To start with Allen plays a neat game of linguistic hide-and-seek, but the film must have a *hero* and a *martyr*. So he must be forced to choose. When he does, it is not from a political choice — argued and defended — but because he is forced to. And how? By a rabbit pulled out of the hat: his illegal gambling! So it all boils down to that, the only device the filmmakers could find to precipitate a "choice" on Allen's part. And what a device! The gambling having been introduced "naturally" in the early sections of the film, it can now come back safely without striking the audience as "unmotivated." Thus the film appears as homogeneous and natural, "true to life," free of those discrepancies and contradictions that are inherent in the social condition, but are abhorred in texts where only unity and coherence

count. All the business with apples and bets is there to "explain" the confrontation, or rather, the narrative structure that contains it. Ritt and Bernstein were incapable of making a political choice themselves *in the film*. As Rosenthal says of THE FRONT: "it merely relocates the signs that tell the audience whom to cheer and whom to boo." The fact that blacklist victims like the movie only goes to show that they too are victims of a cinema that puts everything before politics.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Underground and the WUO split

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Introduction

— Peter Biskind

In JUMP CUT NO. 12/13 we printed [Thomas Waugh's review of Emile de Antonio, Mary Lampson, and Haskell Wexler's UNDERGROUND](#), a film about the Weather Underground Organization (WUO). Since then there has been a severe split in the organization and the film has come under attack. As part of the ongoing discussion of the film, we are reprinting the following repudiation of it by a faction of the WUO called the Revolutionary Committee. We have extracted the critique from "The Split of the Weather Underground Organization" (\$1. From John Brown Book Club, P.O. Box 22383, Seattle, WA 98122), which circulated within the underground in the fall of 1976. The document contains the transcript of a tape made by Bernardino Dorhn on behalf of the Revolutionary Committee, and a statement by the Committee. All of it violently attacks the Central Committee of the WUO. It is this split in WUO which forms the context of the critique of *Underground*. (For a detailed examination of the split, see *Seven Days*, 1:2.)

Dorhn and the Revolutionary Committee accuses the Central Committee, primarily Jeff Jones and Bill Ayers, of "setting out to destroy the women's movement," "selling out the Black struggle," and betraying the principle of anti-imperialism by replacing armed struggle with "opportunistic workplace organizing" and "unprincipled participation in economic struggle."

These charges boil down to a fundamental disagreement over organizing strategies and tactics for the next period. The Central Committee has moved closer to the traditional class analysis of the Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist (formerly the October League) and the Revolutionary Communist Party, an analysis which seeks to lead workers in a revolutionary direction by recruiting and organizing around immediate workplace demands. The Revolutionary Committee, on the other hand, leans towards the traditional strategy of the New Left, which accords a special place to black, Third World, and women's struggles. In practical terms, the Central Committee has downplayed the issue of racism in its workplace organizing, and pulled its cadre out of women's

organizations, prison work, and legal defense groups, which it has denigrated as mere "support" work. The Revolutionary Committee attributes this line to the white-skin privilege and male chauvinism of the members of the Central Committee.

They charge that the film UNDERGROUND was pushed by Jones against the wishes of others, who felt it was dangerous and elitist, as part of an elaborate scheme to sanitize the WUO in preparation for surfacing. Most of the criticisms of the film are functions of the larger attack on the politics of the Central Committee.

CRITICISM OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE BY THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE

UNDERGROUND is a crime against national liberation movements, women, and the anti-imperialist left. It is a vehicle for promoting opportunist politics, and was part of the WUO's strategy for achieving hegemony over the revolutionary forces in the US. The CC is responsible for the film — Jeff Jones initiated the idea and led its implementation. Our denunciation of the film is not a criticism of the filmmakers.

1. The Film is national chauvinist.

- The focus is on *us* as individual white revolutionaries instead of national liberation movements, the leading revolutionary forces in the US and the world. When footage of Black and Third World people appears, it is only part of explaining *our* political development. Third World people are again used in the street interviews, to show us relating to oppressed people. This is substituting relating to Third World people for a revolutionary line and practice about national liberation.

- The portrayal of ourselves as gentle, reasonable, well-educated and WHITE was a move to disassociate ourselves from the alleged "extremism" of prison struggles, the BLA, FALN, SLA ... from armed struggle itself. Bill Ayers is indignant at people who call us adventurist and terrorists.

- The discussion about the Town House explosion is a way of saying, "our comrades have died, we have crossed the line, we are beyond criticism, not subject to the same pressures towards sellout that every other white organization faces." Jeff Jones' rap about waking up each morning wondering how many times he'll be nervous that day is an arrogant lie that denies the existence of privilege in our lives.

- The reality of oppressor/oppressed nations is liquidated constantly. Examples: B. Dohrn asks, "who created the wealth of this country?" and answers with "the people, followed by several shots of white workers. No mention of Black slavery, of the land and labor stolen from Native Americans and Mexicanos, of the tremendous wealth derived from imperialist plunder around the world. Bill Ayers talks about the "American people" rising up to become a people for themselves,

comparing them to the Vietnamese. B. Dohrn says we are a white organization.

2. The film reeks of male supremacy from beginning to end.

- The material basis of women's oppression is denied, and with one exception sexism is defined as a bad attitude, a bad idea. The reality of male privilege is denied. The women's movement is never mentioned. The WUO has a reputation in the Left for deep male supremacy, but Ayers assures the audience that even though sexism used to be a bad attitude in some of the men, things are different now because of how "loving and encouraging" the women have been. This is an attack on male supremacy as man-hating separatists — that is *not* loving and encouraging.

- The presence of the three women in the film is the substitution for the missing revolutionary line on women. We are clearly an organization of exceptional people: women who have made it without the women's movement, men who stopped being sexist so painlessly they didn't feel a thing.

3. The film attacks the anti-imperialist left by denying its existence.

- The message is clear: the WUO and the masses of white American people will make the revolution. "Socialism for white people." This film organized for opportunist politics. It is a setback to revolution, a betrayal.

- It was a direct attempt to counter the effects of PFOC's rectification. The fact that it was released after the Hard Times Conference, when the WUO's line was publicly discredited, indicates that the CC really rejected revolutionary criticism of its line while pretending to accept it.

- It also reveals the CC's willingness to go to any lengths to try to build its own power without regard to revolutionary principles.

TAPE BY BERNARDINE DOHRN

The film UNDERGROUND reeks of white and male supremacy and organizes against real revolution. The release of the film in May was a further step towards implementing our program; to organize a mass base of support on the basis of a reactionary line. It was a conscious attempt to organize support for the individuals in the film — not to strengthen the revolution.

The culmination of this strategy was to be inversion, the word we used to describe surfacing the entire organization. Along with the attempt to control the Hard Times Conference, we had counted on the movie and the establishment of a legal apparatus to implement this strategy of inversion. Jeff Jones proposed this concept, won the entire central committee to it, and has organized for its implementation. This is

accurately described in the revolutionary committee's statement.

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The last word Support Julia Lesage

by John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans

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In our last issue we ran an article about the firing of Julia Lesage from the English department at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus. The main official justification for the dismissal was unsatisfactory scholarship. That claim has been convincingly refuted over the summer by dozens of letters from film specialists here and abroad attesting to the high level of professional achievement found in Lesage's feminist and Marxist writings on film and literature. A list of the senders of over seventy letters affirming the validity and importance of her work reads like a who's who in current film scholarship. In addition to individuals, the Film Studies Association of Canada (with over 100 members) sent a letter of support, as did the editorial board of *Screen* and members of the board of the Society for Education in Film and Television (England). Added together these letters prove that the official explanation is phony. Her work is consistently described as excellent by film specialists, yet the English department and Circle Campus administration repeatedly refuse to change their decision.

There's only one reasonable conclusion: this is a political firing. A feminist and Marxist activist is being run out of the university, not for her scholarship but for her politics. It's not as crudely done as it was during the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War, but it's the same game. While proclaiming itself as a center of liberal and humanist values, the university actually acts to repress free speech and dissent under the totally sham guise of enforcing professional standards. Lesage has been openly Marxist and feminist in her writing, her teaching, and her political activity on and off campus. This is the real reason she is being fired. Julia Lesage's fight is our fight. The task of developing a revolutionary film culture can seem rather tame when seen as the completion of another film or another issue of JUMP CUT. But it also takes clear-cut institutional forms as well, and the fight to keep Lesage's job is such a struggle. In an earlier [editorial on Marxist film criticism \(JUMP CUT 8\)](#), we pointed out,

"The resources, the institutions of film criticism, are by and large constructed to screen out everything but what is already accepted, already being done."

"Fashion appears in the guise of change. The wholly and partially government subsidized film magazines, the commercial outlets for reviews, the film conferences, scholarships, jobs, research money, in fact the whole apparatus serves to preserve the status quo. Interestingly, while Marxism is excluded from this system, sexism, racism, and elitism are welcome."

The fight for Julia Lesage's job involves all of us who are working to build a liberating film culture. What can you do? Right now the focal point of the fight is on campus with the student Justice for Julia committee exposing the administration's false justifications and pushing for reinstatement. But support from everyone concerned — teachers and students, filmmakers, cultural workers, feminists, and radicals — keeps the pressure on and shows that the issues won't just go away as the reactionaries hope. Letters of support are still important. Address them to: Chancellor Donald Riddle, 2833 University Hall, UICC, Chicago IL 60680, with copies to: Norman Cantor, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 2703 University Hall, UICC; Dean Elmer Hadley, Liberal Arts and Sciences, 350 University Hall, UICC; and Julia Lesage, English, 2221 University Hall, UICC.

In the campus struggles of the 60s we learned the truth about university complicity in imperialist war and domestic repression. The firing of Julia Lesage shows once again that universities will respect democratic rights of free speech and inquiry only when they are forced to do so. The bankrupt liberals of the UICC administration and English department fired Lesage for reasons which have been proven patently false. But they won't change their decision simply when the facts prove them wrong because the issue is not professional standards but political power. Fighting back is the only way we can win. Join the struggle!

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In memory of Martin Walsh, 1947-1977

by Chuck Kleinhans

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Soon after we started JUMP CUT four years ago, Martin Walsh wrote a letter encouraging us. From that beginning Martin was a regular contributor of articles, a friend and supportive critic of the magazine. We published much of his best work — articles that make substantial contributions to radical film criticism: an extended [critique of the Straub/Huillet films](#) (JUMP CUT 4) and a detailed analysis of their film [MOSES AND AARON](#) (JC 12/13), a study of [Losey's version of Brecht's GALILEO](#) (JC 7), [Antonioni's THE PASSENGER](#) (JC 8), a critique of Noel Burch's theories (JC 10/11) and a [reconsideration of Rossellini](#) (JC 15). The general direction of his critical work was aimed at exploring Brecht's influence on political filmmaking, a subject he planned to explore in a book-length study. Reading over his articles in JUMP CUT, *Monogram* and other film publications, I'm constantly impressed by his insight and rigor. Martin was serious about thinking, and I believe that was a strong part of what attracted him to Brecht. And like Brecht, he combined his commitment to thought with a rich comic sense of life as those who knew him personally witnessed daily.

A British citizen with degrees from Exeter, Kent, and the Slade School of Fine Art, Martin began teaching film at the University of Western Ontario in 1972. From training, temper, and talent he brought a special set of interests and skills to his work as teacher and critic. An accomplished photographer and collector of original art and kitsch, he had a strong appreciation of the visual craft of film. His house overflowed with books on art, film, music, literature, and records ranging from classical to rock — all reflecting his wide-ranging intellect. For Martin studying and teaching film served as a place of synthesis for his talents and concerns. That synthesis was unique. While he shared many interests with other young British film critics, living in Canada he developed independently of the English scene. He wanted Canada to develop its own national film studies and actively participated in professional organizations in Canada and helped in founding the new journal *Cine-Tracts* which he hoped could build Canadian film culture.

Martin and I corresponded quite a bit before we finally met at a film conference. I immediately liked him, and we had the chance to meet again several times, becoming stronger friends each time. We also argued a lot. Part of that was due to the inevitable difference between editor and writer, but mostly it was political. We differed, but we also fiercely believed that the other's ideas were important, and it became a healthy criticism that helped each of us grow. Martin taught me a lot.

In early July I visited Martin in London, Ontario. Having just been hired to teach film at Kent, he was packing to return to England. He glowed with the happiness of someone who is reaching a new stage in life. I left with promises to visit him the next summer in England, and I drove on thinking of how fine and right his life was, and how good his future looked. That made the news of his critical injury when struck by a car while cycling a day later all the more terrible. He died days later.

We have his critical writings. They are a substantial contribution to developing a radical political film culture. But we have lost the man — his humor, his political commitment, his intellectual seriousness and rigor, and his generosity. Martin gave much of himself to many people. Those of us who knew him and received that gift treasure it as consolation for our loss.

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The last word Gay liberation

by Michael Beer, Peter Biskind, Laura Brousseau, Julianne Burton, Daniel Cetinich, Leslie Clark, Stephanie Goldberg, Linda Greene, John Hess, Judith Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, Robin Lakes, Ernie Larsen, Julia Lesage, Sherry Miner, Gerald Peary, Dana Polan, Ruby Rich, Kimberly Safford, Robert Stam, Anna Marie Taylor, William Van Wert, Linda Vick, Linda Williams

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In conjunction with our Special Section on "Gays and Film" in this issue, we members of the editorial board and staff of JUMP CUT want to indicate our active support for and solidarity with the struggles of lesbians and gay men.

From our first issue, JUMP CUT has defined itself as an actively anti-sexist publication. By sexism we mean the oppression of one group of people by another on the basis of sex (biology) and sexual identity (psychology) or sexual preference, activity, and lifestyle. Sexism oppresses women, gay men, and lesbians (a double oppression as women and homosexuals). The oppression of gays in our society is one aspect of sexism. Sexism plays a specific and indispensable role in maintaining capitalism and vice-versa. To fight that system of oppression, to attack its props of labor exploitation, racism, sexism, and to challenge all the other dehumanizing aspects of bourgeois culture is the task of all progressive people.

Looking at the well-financed Anita Bryant campaign against gays, we see how the reactionaries will use anti-gay consciousness to build their own strength and to reinforce their attack on the gains of the 60s, on abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, minority education and housing, welfare rights, labor advances, and other hard-won achievements. Clearly, sexual choice must be defended against encroachments by the bourgeois state. Gay civil rights are essential democratic rights. But, as immediate and tangible as the right-wing threat seems, as the justice of sexual choice is, as the necessity to fight for democratic rights is, the struggle for homosexual liberation must be

seen in a wider context.

Active support for lesbian and gay male liberation emerges as a logical concomitant of the feminist struggle against patriarchy. Patriarchy systematically divides power in society on the basis of sex. Specifically, it oppresses women as inferior within all class and strata. Feminism politically analyses and challenges patriarchy, recognizes the systematic oppression of women as a group, and fights for the liberation of all women, not simply for the individual advancement of a select few.

Patriarchy predates capitalism and still exists in contemporary socialist countries. However patriarchy is not inherently necessary to socialism, while it is an indispensable structural feature of capitalism. Patriarchy is a way of organizing society to insure adult male dominance of institutions, privileges and power. To justify this inequality, patriarchy asserts that norms of behavior are determined by clear-cut sexual differences. Therefore, patriarchy must link human sexuality directly to biological differences of species reproduction. To establish and preserve heterosexuality as an institution with the force of natural, moral, and social 'normality,' our society maintains a distinct category of non-heterosexuality; and it constructs social distinctions on the basis of sexual practices which are not neutral, but which serve to validate the dominant culture. Thus our society makes the straight life style the norm and casts gays into the position of outsider" or "deviant."

The whole spectrum of the feminist movement — from liberal feminism as seen in MS. or NOW to radical feminism and separatism to socialist feminism — has battled sex role stereotypes and the institutions and socialization which function to maintain those stereotypes. Such stereotypes mean that character types, social roles, and so-called "natural" abilities, are assigned to one group or another of the human race according to sex. Politically, to attack sex role stereotypes means to affirm — in our intellectual endeavors, our political practice, and our daily life — that sex must not be made a basis for defining human roles, no more than race should be. We acknowledge that different groups in society, particularly oppressed groups, have a unique subcultural experience and face the task of asserting their subcultural identity. One step in overcoming oppression is affirming the special and unique characteristics of the group because a distinct positive identity has often been denied, and affirmation of socio-cultural separatism is necessary to building group solidarity. At the same time we must be alert to negative aspects of subcultural identity, such as affirming gayness without attacking misogyny, racism, and ageism. But simply recognizing gay male and lesbian subculture should not then stop with straights saying, "Let them do their own thing." It is the task of progressive people in the straight culture to recognize the ways that sex differences have been built up and maintained to act as the major support for patriarchy and one of the major supports of capitalism.

Feminists have analyzed the role of the nuclear family in maintaining capitalism. This analysis attacks the destructive split between the public

sphere and the private sphere, between production and reproduction, between paid and unpaid social labor, and between Mother / Father / Girl / Boy roles and rewards. The division of life into paid and unpaid social labor, separating workplace and community, appears as a new feature under capitalism and is essential to maintaining it. The struggle against patriarchy is thus not subordinate to the class struggle, but it is itself a form of class struggle. Today we see this struggle continues in the socialist countries; the division between the public and private spheres was attacked during the Cultural Revolution in China, and in Cuba the new Family Code is a major attempt to change remaining capitalist policies and attitudes.

Gay men and lesbians affirm that sexuality is not linked to biological definitions of sex. Their stance threatens the ideological underpinnings of the nuclear family in capitalism. Lesbians, for example, as women-identified women who define themselves in terms of economic and emotional support independently of men, threaten the patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes. And all gays in society challenge the puritanical component of capitalist culture.

Bourgeois patriarchal ideology maintains these divisions. First of all, it posits as a given something which is not scientifically true. From all that we know about both humans and higher primates, social institutions should take for granted as "natural" a range of sexual expression and gratification from heterosexuality through bisexuality through homosexuality. But in our society, only straightness is recognized as normal. Furthermore, ideology never has to speak of what is normal — that is, taken for granted. A society's portrait of what is *abnormal* reaffirms its norms. And in the media, gays are always and only seen as extraordinary or abnormal, never "just plain folks" like "the viewing public" is assumed to be. As Richard Dyer points out in his article on gays in film noir, the films use gays as evil figures, clearly defined by dress and gesture, so as to prove above all that the detective hero is straight and that his is the only kind of sexuality which is unquestionably good and the "natural" heir to patriarchal power.

The fact that the media (even when liberal enough to show on the news protests against Anita Bryant) constantly depicts gays and lesbians as "deviant" or odd or extraordinary reaffirms that the rest of the audience has certain natural rights as straights. The media never presents any argument to define what it means to heterosexuals to be heterosexuals. It's just taken for granted that they have the following rights, among others — to have a job, get a bank loan, be elected to public office, raise a family, live where one wants, show affection in public, not suffer harassment for one's sexual practices, and to have one's love problems taken as acceptable topics for both social conversation and the theme of most novels, films, and TV programs. Yet by virtue of the media kind of definitions, imposed by straights in the first place, gays are considered to have abrogated these rights — proven by the fact that it is depicted as "extraordinary" when gays fight for the most basic civil rights.

Looking at the wider context in which any serious discussion of gay issues and struggles must take place, especially at patriarchy and its role in sexism and capitalism, it is clear why the struggle against capitalist exploitation and degradation of life and for human liberation must include active support for gay male and lesbian liberation. All branches of feminism and the left must fight for gay liberation and not leave it far gays to do themselves. There is no room for the liberalism like this: "I support the right of consenting adults to do what they want to do behind closed doors." Why not? Lets look at that fallacy clearly. Right now the majority of gay people cannot become involved in political activity for gay civil rights because they do not now have those very rights which would protect their political activity. They have no other protection than secrecy, pretending they are straight, living in the closet. What does that mean for feminist and left political activism? How can any project hope to recruit someone who still feels the necessity to act as a closet gay within that group? Too often, progressive groups still force gays to pretend to be something they are not — or ask gays to not make homosexuality such a big issue or not act so 'blatant' about their life style choice. (Isn't the heterosexual couple a visibly blatant life style choice? What social structures does the visibility of the couple, especially in the media, maintain?) Homophobia too often divides the left and feminist movements off from their allies and limits everyone's struggle against systematic oppression. Gays are not just or mainly professionals, but they are also part of the working class (the standard conservative estimate is that homosexuals form 10-20% of the population, distributed evenly across class lines). Clearly working class homosexuals, like working class women and racial minorities, face a special oppression. But these are the last people, both in the Movement and in society at large, whom we allow even to articulate what their situation is.

Unless the entire feminist movement and the left fight to protect gay people who have come out, guaranteeing them the same rights that straights have — the right to maintain a job, residence and family — then gay people within those movements will not themselves be able to actively work for their own rights. We all have to give organizational support and emotional solidarity to the gay males and lesbians in our groups and in society at large. We, not they, have the responsibility to establish some real basis for gays to come out within our organizations, and we must make our projects ones in which gays would feel comfortable working openly.

We do not ask for a sentimental support for gays or a liberal "let-them-do-their-own-thing" (often with an implied "elsewhere"). Our support comes from an analysis of a whole system of exploitation. Capitalism has used sexism to divide the working class by providing certain roles for men and women, by commodifying daily life and objectifying sexuality in advertising, and by atomizing people's lives and thus giving them a sense of powerlessness. Capitalism depends on sexism. It is a system of production that has long used and very much needs highly differentiated sex roles, and sex role stereotypes, objectified human sexuality, and

alienated human relations to prop itself up. For that reason, although gayness challenges many of the basic tenets of capitalism and sexism, gay and lesbian liberation is not complete without overthrowing this system of production. Equally, any true socialist system must also challenge the manifestations of patriarchy's — and particularly capitalism's — outworn sexism such as highly differentiated sex roles.

The left, broadly speaking, has been very reluctant to support gay liberation and much of the left has actively opposed it, reproducing some of the worst antigay attitudes of straight society. In the Soviet Union, the prize-winning filmmaker Sergei Paradjanov, maker of *SHADOWS OF OUR FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS* (1964), was and remains jailed only because of his homosexuality. And in the U.S. left, various groups such as the Communist Party, the pro-Chinese Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), the Revolutionary Communist Party, and other sect groups define homosexuality as a product of bourgeois decadence. This unscientific view is then bolstered by these left groups with the charge that gay liberation is an attack on the working class family, which they see as a defense against capitalism. This view idealizes the working class family in an ahistorical way. The family is an historical institution with both progressive and reactionary aspects. While serving as a refuge from some of the worst aspects of capitalism, the family as it exists in the working class today also serves to reproduce some of the worst aspects of bourgeois ideology by oppressing women and children.

Lifestyle issues are not the primary political issues in any revolution, and, as the women's movement has shown, sexual freedom does not produce equality. Gay liberation is more than a matter of civil rights or lifestyle or private choice. In advanced capitalist countries, direct economic exploitation in the production sector is the fundamental form of class oppression. Yet increasingly in the logic of capitalist development, with its insatiable appetite for profits, such a development turns the "private" and the "personal" into the political. Capitalism has invaded and tries to commodify daily life. The fight against capitalism takes many forms, and key arenas of struggle today include daily life, personal relations, sexuality, and the family.

The struggle for gay liberation must be carried out on both the personal and institutional levels. In film studies we need a film criticism that is actively anti-sexist. Some critics have begun to look for gay images in film in a lively and vital way. Although such a task serves a needed function at this point in film criticism, as does the searching out of gay film history, we need especially a gay criticism that has a vision of human liberation. In the immediate present, such a criticism might take as its task some institutional goals — to promote specifically gay filmmaking and aid in its distribution and exhibition. Gay people in the media must have support to express their real artistic concerns and to challenge oppressive roles for gays without fear of losing their jobs. Teachers and students — both straight and gay — must begin to see gay male and lesbian cultural perspectives as something that is not

peripheral but essential to understanding society as a whole. As James Baldwin said, "Until you know my name, you won't know your own."

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